DISTRICT DECISION MAKING REGARDING SPECIAL EDUCATION: 
RESPONSES FROM THREE DISTRICTS

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Lauren M. Butters

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Abstract

Special education varies from school district to school district, although each school district is required to attend to a number of federal and state mandates with regard to special education. In many cases, however, these laws do not state how school districts must programmatically attend to these expectations through their practices and services (MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001; Scull & Winkler, 2011). A school district is allowed to individualize its special education offerings to meet the needs of the students in the district as long as the mandates are enforced (Chaikind, Danielson, & Brauen, 1993; “Moving to a new location,” 2010). While current literature on special education discusses current best practices, challenges, and ideas for attending to the needs of special education students, how different school districts programmatically pursue these needs is not well studied. In this study, interviews with district special education administrators in three suburban school districts in southeastern Massachusetts provide an understanding of how these districts have responded to the mandates, how the interviewees perceive their district’s special education policies, services, programs, and resources, and how the districts have made decisions regarding their programmatic offerings in special education.

Key words: decision-making, school administrators, special education, school districts, special education services
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Contents

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....................................................................................................5
Statement of the Problem and Significance .............................................................................5
Discussion of Practical and Intellectual Goals .........................................................................10
Research Question ................................................................................................................10
Summary of Paper Contents and Organization .....................................................................11
Theoretical Framework ........................................................................................................11

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ......................................................................17
School District Decision Making and Special Education ..................................................17
History of Special Education ...............................................................................................24
Current Best Practices in Special Education .......................................................................26
Current Challenges in Special Education ............................................................................33
Suggestions for Addressing Current Challenges in Special Education ...............................38

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN .........................................................................................43
Research Question ................................................................................................................43
Methodology ..........................................................................................................................44
Site .......................................................................................................................................44
Validity and Credibility .........................................................................................................49
Protection of Human Subjects ...............................................................................................50

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS ....................................................................................52
Study Context ........................................................................................................................52
Town A Public Schools ........................................................................................................53
Town B Public Schools ........................................................................................................67
Town C Public Schools ........................................................................................................82
Prominent Themes ...............................................................................................................95
Differences Across the Districts ............................................................................................104
Summary of Findings ..........................................................................................................108

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS .............................................109
Revisiting the Problem of Practice .......................................................................................109
Review of Methodology .......................................................................................................111
Discussion of Major Findings ..............................................................................................112
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework ....................................116
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review ..............................................118
Limitations ............................................................................................................................143
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................145
Future Studies .......................................................................................................................147
Implication for Practice .......................................................................................................148
Next Steps ............................................................................................................................149
Personal Reflection .............................................................................................................150

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................152

APPENDICES .............................................................................................................................186
Chapter I: Introduction

The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, commonly called IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities be granted rights to education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The majority of the time this requires the use of special education. According to Friend and Bursuck (1999), “special education is the specially designed instruction provided by the school district or other local education agency that meets the unique needs of students identified as disabled” (p. 2). How school districts implement IDEIA is not specified, however (MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001). While common programs and methods are executed, all districts do not utilize one form of special education. Districts individualize their special education programs to meet the needs of their student population in the way they feel is most beneficial, based on their knowledge and access to resources (MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001). Therefore, special education procedures, programs, and practices can vary from district to district. Discerning how different districts determine their special education programs may be helpful in identifying strategies, structures, and use of resources that can benefit other districts. Identifying programs and strategies that work, challenges, and common themes across communities may prove helpful in identifying how special education services on the whole can be improved across communities.

Statement of the Problem and Significance

Just like each special education student is an individual with specific needs, how each school district implements special education laws and regulations is also individualized and specific. All districts must follow the same guidelines, protocols, and procedures as set forth by law, but how they do so varies. Each community can be said to have individualized their special education procedures, programs, and practices. These are not stagnant, but evolve as the needs
of the school district’s population changes. The federal government mandates special education laws that must be followed at the state and town levels. This top-down legislation from the federal government to state departments of education must then be implemented by the school district to the best of its ability given funding and resources. Rarely are the stakeholders who are on the frontline of special education involved in the creation of the laws. Special educators and aides are rarely consulted by their district administration with regard to the implementations of these laws and the programs and practices that the district executes. In addition, they are rarely asked to participate in discussions regarding what is working, what is not, and how solutions can be reached.

All districts must follow the mandates set forth in IDEIA. For example, when a child is referred for an initial special education evaluation or three years has passed since their last evaluation, IDEIA requires that the school district evaluate the student to determine if he/she has a disability. The testing used must be “in a form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally” (“Changes in Initial,” 2006, p. 2). IDEIA does not mandate which assessments the school district uses to evaluate the student. These can vary from district to district depending on the assessments the district owns. Additionally, the person who administers the testing can vary depending on the district. In some school districts there is a staff member whose job solely entails evaluating students, while in other districts the special education liaison for the student administers the education aspect of the evaluation.

Another example of how districts are meeting the mandates of IDEIA in different ways is with regard to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). IDEIA requires that “special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational
environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (“Sec. 300.114,” 2006, par. 4). This does not specify what types of classes or programs a district can create. As a result, districts have to decide what types of classes and programs to offer their special education population.

The sharing of ideas is a critical part of education (Schneider, 2007). Most teachers welcome the exchange of ideas and materials to continually improve and enhance their practice. Unfortunately, collaboration usually only happens at the school level, and the extent to which it happens can vary depending on the school and the leadership (Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008). Typically, there is no time set into the schedule for teachers to gather, share, and discuss practices. As Schneider (2007) states, “not all schools facilitate meaningful collaboration” (p. 7). The same is true at the state level. Special education is implemented differently in different school districts, though the services and programs offered are comparable (Chaikind, Danielson, & Brauen, 1993; “Moving to a new location,” 2010). The services, programs, and procedures of one district can be foreign to the educators in the neighboring districts unless they have worked for, lived in, or had a student who has transferred from that district. If the last is the case, the information the special educator is provided comes from the student’s IEP, which does not offer in-depth explanations. Almost 25 years ago, Singer, Palfey, Butler, & Walker (1989) stated:

School districts differ in referral practices, efficacy of child find programs, psychometric guideline, the strength of professional and special interest groups, the ability of parents to seek services, the availability and cost of services, the acceptability of particular designations, and the history of legal advocacy and litigation (p. 262).
While school districts do not differ in all these areas today, they still differ in some of them. This is explored further below.

The significance of this problem is that there is no continuity across states or school districts. Each district is allowed to make its own decisions regarding what programs and services it provides, as long as they meet the government special education mandates (Chaikind et al., 1993; “Moving to a new location,” 2010). This discrepancy in procedures, programs, and services could pose some problems. One area where school districts can differ is in the diagnosis process (Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991; LDA Public Policy/Advocacy Committee, 2010; Lester & Kelman, 1997; MacMillan, Gresham, & Bocian, 1998; MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001; Mercer, Hughes, & Mercer, 1985; Scull & Winkler, 2011; “What Happens,” 2013) and the criteria of the classification of students’ disabilities (Bienenstock & Vernon, 1994; Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991; MacMillan et al., 1998; Mercer et al., 1985; Mercer, Jordan, Allsopp, & Mercer, 1996; Scull & Winkler, 2011; Singer et al., 1989). Having different diagnosing processes and classification criteria means that the amount of students determined to have a disability and require special education may vary (Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991). A student might qualify in one district or state, but not in another. In addition, a student’s special education placement can vary district to district based on the student’s disability (Singer, Butler, Palfrey, & Walker, 1986).

Determining a child’s disability is similar to labeling the child in a way that affects the student’s whole educational and school social experience (Mercer et al., 1996; Singer et al., 1989). If a student were to move, the new town might not utilize the same criteria for disability categories. As a result, if the new town makes a decision about the student’s program placement,
service provider, or other related special education services based on the student’s label, the
services the child receives may not be accurate (Chaikind et al., 1993). In addition, how towns
interpret IEP policies and procedures can fluctuate (Smith, 1990). If a student were to move
from one district to another, the new town would use the student’s current IEP to determine
placement and services. Unfamiliarity with the previous town’s IEP policies, their classification
of disabilities, and services offered might lead to the student’s new special education program
being inappropriate.

The top-down approach typically happens twice in regard to special education policy.
First at the government level, where school districts are told what is required through mandates.
Then at the district level, where the district administration informs the schools and teachers what
programs and services are to be offered (Owens, 1998). The process in which the district
administration decides which programs and strategies to implement in the schools is foreign to
the district’s teachers and faculty. Another problem arises because the people in charge of
implementing the decisions, the school district’s personnel who work with the students directly
(teachers and aides), are not informed of how these decisions came to be and why the school
district has elected to utilize the strategies identified. This can lead to feelings of
disenfranchisement and less willingness to adopt reforms being imposed by school
administration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Meyer, 2009; Zoller, Ramanthan, & Yu, 1999).

With top-down management decision-making, school districts are not including the
people on the frontlines of the implementation of their special education programs and services.
The school district administration is thus ignoring a valuable resource: the expertise and direct
experience of school faculty and staff.
Discussion of Practical and Intellectual Goals

**Practical goal.** School districts’ responses to IDEIA mandates vary, but at the same time meet the same set of expectations. In this study, I will explore how three different school districts in three demographically and economically similar towns implement special education policy and procedures. This will fulfill my practical goal of understanding what is involved in districts’ decision-making processes, how they evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, the challenges they face, and what they are considering when it comes to the future of special education in their districts.

**Intellectual goal.** The intellectual goal of this study is to understand what happened at the local level when legislation went into effect and how some of these responses and the decision-making processes across communities differed; specifically, how different school districts decided to address the same legal requirements.

**Research Question**

The research question serves to explore how key stakeholders across three different school district administrations make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding special education, taking into account their perceptions of mandates, policies, services, programs, strategies, and use of resources in effectively supporting their special education students. The research question was

1. In the context of current expectations as set forth by federal legislation for providing special education students with appropriate instructional support, how do suburban school districts make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding district policies, services, programs, strategies, and use of resources to meet the needs of their special education students?
Summary of Paper Contents and Organization

This thesis is organized in the following manner: abstract, an introduction to the study, the theoretical framework used to inform the design of the study and analysis of data, a review of relevant literature to the study, the research design, research findings, discussion of research findings, references, and appendices.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to inform the design of this study and the analysis of the findings comprises contingency theory. Contingency theory is part of organizational theory and focuses on how organizations adjust and adapt to various demands. The following section will explore this theory in further detail.

Contingency theory. Contingency theory, also known as structural contingency theory, is the belief that there is no singular best way for organizations to structure themselves or to make decisions, and that organizations need to adapt based on their environment and the contingency factors that they encounter (Powers, 2000). There are a number of different issues and circumstances beyond the control of school administrations, including but not limited to government mandates, budget, enrollment, and costs related to operations, transportation, instruction, and salaries (Koberg, 1986). School systems and school administrations have to react, respond, and adapt to a variety of different issues, especially in regard to special education. New guidelines, disabilities, funding, and teaching methods often require changes at the school level. This study explored how special education administrators across three different school districts responded to these challenges.

Contingency theory is derived from organizational theory and open system theory. Organizational theory involves “identify[ing] and describ[ing] some set of fixed “principles” (in
especially with regard to organizational structures. There are four principles of organizational theory. The first principle, scalar principle, states that authority should go directly from the top management down to the lower-level workers. Unity of command, the second principle, claims that a person should report to only one supervisor. Over time, this principle has been modified, as various tiers of hierarchy have developed. The third principle is the exception principle, which involves the writing down of decisions and orders for frequent issues so they can be established as rules and standard procedures. They are put into writing so that decision makers can focus on other issues that arise. The last principle, span of control, states that there should be a set number of people reporting to an administrator (Owens, 1998).

Open system theory “is the focus on the dependency relationships and exchanges between the organization and its external environment” (Hanson & Brown, 1977, p. 72). The impact of the environment on the organization is the focus of open system theory (Hanson, 1979). An organization is an open system, since it constantly interacts with its environment. Schools are both supported by and support the community socially, politically, and culturally, so schools are continuously interacting with their environments (Baldridge & Burnham, 1975; Hanson & Brown, 1977; Owen, 1998).

Contingency theory was utilized to inform the analysis of this qualitative study, since it helped with “understanding school systems and how their organizations can be adapted to meeting environmental demands” (Derr & Gabarro, 1972, p. 39). This theory “analyzes the internal adjustments of the organization…as it seeks to meet the shifting demands of its external or internal environment” (Hanson, 1979, p. 101). The environmental uncertainties organizations can face make it necessary for them to make changes to adjust and adapt to these new demands
(Burns & Stalker, 1994; Damanpour, 1991; Derr & Gabarro, 1972; Koberg, 1986; Powers, 2000). The whole organization is not always affected by the required changes, so only the parts affected should be a part of the solution (Hanson, 1979).

While schools and special education departments face similar external and internal demands, the adjustments they make to adapt to these demands can and do differ. In addition, a school system’s management system is an adhocracy, since it tends to be more reactive instead of premeditated (Hanson, 1979; Koberg, 1986). While school systems cannot plan for every contingency they will face, it is important that when they are required to make an adjustment, they only do so after exploring various options. Schools require “variability in organizational responses capabilities to cope with changing environmental needs and demands” (Hanson & Brown, 1977, p. 72).

Hanson (1979) believed that there are basic assumptions in contingency theory related to organizations and individuals. One assumption is that a middle ground exists between the idea that one universal principle of management can be applied to all organizations and the idea that each organization needs its own individual style of management. Another assumption is that organizations have not only an overarching goal, but also formal and informal goals that help guide all decisions. With regard to organizations’ administration and leadership styles, there is no one best way to be organized, which is why different approaches are utilized by different organizations and even within the same organization.

The goal of all organizations, including educational organizations, is to perform at their highest ability. In order to do so, they need to adapt their characteristics to fit the contingencies they face. This is why contingency theory “holds that there is a fit between the organizational structure and the organizational contingency that affects organizational performance”
A policy that once had worked for the organization may no longer be suitable if there has been an environmental change (Derr & Gabarro, 1972). If organizations do not adapt appropriately, they are not able to work to their highest performance ability. As a result, an “organization becomes shaped by the contingencies, because it needs to fit them to avoid loss of performance” (Donaldson, 2001, p. 2). Organization theory states that there is only one optimum structure for each organization, though this structure varies depending on the organization (Donaldson, 2001). The best way to be structured is unique to that organization; in other words, each organization has its own best way to be organized. Contingency theory states that organizations should adopt the appropriate changes, but not automatically or necessarily adopt the maximum changes, since that would not be effective (Donaldson, 2001). Responses to contingencies need to be individualized to the organization and its needs.

Contingency theory was useful to apply to the investigation of the three school districts because it states that “there is no single organizational structure that is highly effective for all organizations” (Donaldson, 1996, p. 57) and there is no singular method an organization should utilize when adapting (Derr & Gabarro, 1972; Powers, 2000). Each situation and circumstance is different. Even though organizations can be similar, each organization needs to individualize responses to changes to fit its unique needs and factors. Automatically copying a similar organization may not be the answer. School districts on a whole are similar, but when looked at closely, the differences in their programs and organization become apparent. The decisions made by district administrators need to be individualized to their specific organization and its needs. This is true in all aspects, but especially with regard to special education. No two children are alike; thus, the one size fits all model cannot be applied in special education (Watson, 2012). As a result, contingency theory is useful in analyzing academic organizations.
Contingency variables that an organization can face are “situational variables that influence the relationship between managerial strategies or organizational structures and organizational outcomes” (Hanson, 1979, p. 101). Examples of contingencies include but are not limited to: administration personalities, environmental culture and hostilities, national culture, parent organization, public accountability, regulations, size, strategy, task uncertainty, and technology (Donaldson, 1996). Other examples include “budget, employee relations, policies, and political considerations” (Hanson & Brown, 1977, p. 73). The implementation of new policies and modifications to past government policies also forces organizations to adapt (Donaldson, 1996).

The environment, also considered a contingency, can determine if an organization succeeds or fails (Powers, 2000). Environment influences an organization, and an organization needs to adapt to its environment in order to be effective (Donaldson, 1996). Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) believed that the differentiation and integration of an organization is affected by the rate of environmental change it faces. When deciding how best to adapt, an organization must consider all the environmental variables (Goodnow, 1982).

Contingencies can lead to structural changes (Donaldson, 1987). Structural contingency theory “focuses on how organizations determine which organizational structure to take” (Power, 2000, p. 7). Mintzberg (1979) gave an example of structural contingency theory that demonstrates how this theory may be applied to school districts. When an organization is small, it has a simple organizational structure. The person at the top makes all the decisions. As the organization grows, the structure becomes tiered. Levels of hierarchy form, and some of the decision-making authority is passed down to lower levels. The more an organization grows, the more differentiated its structure becomes. “Administration is also increasingly broken into
specializations,” (Donaldson, 1996, p. 62) until the organization is divided into people who do the work and those who supervise and make decisions (Mintzberg, 1979). This applies to the evolution of school districts; thus structural contingency theory works well with a qualitative study involving school systems. Schools started as one-room schoolhouses, but have evolved since that time (Mondale & Patton, 2002). Schools are now structured as districts and run by superintendents, with assistance from additional administration, and department heads, who participate in decision-making at both the district level and the individual school level.

Critics of contingency theory believe that there is no one single theory, but rather there is a collection of contingency theory that forms a contingency approach (Donaldson, 1987; Donaldson, 1996). Donaldson (1996) disagreed and felt that when exploring what critics call the collection of contingency theory, there is “one common, underlying theory,” (Donaldson, 1996, p. 65) and that this theory is the core theory. Donaldson (1987) also stated that “the ultimate cause of structural change is a change in the contingency variable” (p. 2). Donaldson (1987) called this the structural adaptation to regain fit (SARFIT), meaning that contingency and at least one aspect of the organizational structure must fit. If this fit is positive, performance is positively affected. If there is a misfit, performance is negatively affected. When an organization faces a contingency, it automatically faces a misfit (since what had originally fit no longer works) and performance declines. It must adopt a new fit so that it can restore performance levels. School district administrations must make decisions regarding adopting, modifying, and eliminating programs, practices, and teaching methods in order to face the contingencies that they encounter.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

In order to understand how different school districts responded to special education expectations, it was necessary to review literature on how school districts made decisions, the history of special education, and special education practices today.

The following questions guided my analysis of the existing scholarly literature:

– What decision-making processes and special education knowledge do districts use to make programmatic and strategic decisions in service of their special education students?
– How has the history of special education changed at the federal and school district level?
– What are currently considered best practices in special education?
– What are viewed as current challenges in special education?
– What suggestions can be found for improving special education?

School District Decision Making and Special Education

School district administrators can take different academic paths to become a superintendent. The variety of these paths, which include “course work and field experiences leading to a superintendent’s license, an Ed.D., or a Ph.D. degree,” (Jackson & Kelley, 2002, p. 204) can be a problem because it means that licensure recipients have received various levels of preparation for their job. To help combat this, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) combined their standards to ensure that all students taking educational leadership courses would leave with an understanding that they were expected to work towards the success of all students and utilize best practices to facilitate student learning when they became an administrator (Jackson & Kelley, 2002).
School districts have “many top managers” (March, 1978, p. 235), but they are usually run by a single individual, the superintendent. Typically, the school committee members also share a role in the running of the school district. In addition, there are usually other school administrators at the district level, like assistant superintendents and directors of programs including student support services and special education. The members of the school committee are elected officials and their terms can be short, resulting in rapid turnover (Alsbury, 2008; March, 1978). High turnover rates also apply to superintendent positions (Alsbury, 2008; Fusarelli, 2006; March, 1978; Shields, 2000).

**How decisions are made.** Each school district administration is required to make countless decisions regarding the education of the students in the district. Typically, the school board and the superintendent work together when making important decisions that affect the school district (Andero, 2000). These decisions need to take into account regulations from court rulings and the state and federal governments (Andero, 2000). Some decisions depend upon each individual’s working knowledge – also known as practitioner knowledge or local knowledge – comprising their beliefs, interests, experiences, and assumptions (Coburn, Toure', & Yamashita, 2009; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Kennedy, 1983; March, 1978; Storey & Beeman, 2009; Weiss, 1995). In addition to working knowledge, schools also utilize data-driven, evidence-based problem-solving processes and site-based management when making decisions.

**Data driven/evidence based.** The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that data be used to inform school decision-making practices in the United States (Farley-Ripple, 2012; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Kowalski, 2009). Data, such as student achievement test scores, is used to determine the effectiveness of the district and the educators that work there (Honig & Coburn, 2008; Shen & Cooley, 2008). This data affects not only schools, but also their greater
communities, because schools are a driving force in determining a town’s value and status (Shen & Cooley, 2008). In addition to using data to drive decision-making, school administrations can also look to evidence-based practices, which use empirical evidence to help guide decisions making (Coburn et al., 2009; Kowalski, 2009; Johnson, 1999; Luckhurst & Lauback, 2006; Weiss, 1980). When implementing evidenced-based practice, administrators should follow five steps: decide on the question, locate evidence, evaluate the evidence, make and implement decisions, and evaluate the results (Johnson, 2006).

One of the main issues with using data to inform the decision-making process is that many districts overemphasize the use of the data, instead of approaching it as a snapshot that does not offer a clear profile of student learning. Also, the professionals in charge of utilizing the data are not always trained to use it effectively (Luckhurst & Lauback, 2006; Shen & Cooley, 2008). Therefore, Shen and Cooley (2008) feel that data alone should not be utilized to make major curriculum and instruction decisions.

Decisions should be based on multiple forms of evidence (Honig & Coburn, 2008). Educational research, including social science research, can be used to inform decisions (Corcoran, 2003; Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001; Farley-Ripple, 2012; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Luckhurst & Lauback, 2006). School administrations should also use evidence from experts in the field when making decisions (Corcoran, 2003; Corcoran et al., 2001; Weiss, 1995). Evaluation information should also be used as evidence (Corcoran, 2003; Corcoran et al., 2001; Honig & Coburn, 2008).

*Problem-solving processes.* Administrators who utilize the problem-solving process when making decisions must take two steps: understanding and solving (Van Lehn, 1990). Understanding is necessary so administrators can truly determine what the problem is
(Leithwood, Steinbac, & Raun, 1993). They need to interpret the information in order to evaluate it and set goals regarding how they will go about reaching the best solution. The second step, solving, involves taking the current state or status and making it into a desired outcome (Leithwood et al., 1993). Here, it is important that administrators anticipate the issues that might arise, plan for how to deal with them, and be flexible when unplanned issues do arise (Leithwood et al., 1993). Once that is done, they can truly begin the solving process by collaborating with colleagues in a structured way, usually by meeting to determine each other’s views regarding the problem and issues associated with the problem (Andero, 2000; Cropper & Hill, 1978; DiNatale, 1994; Dynes & Pruitt, 1978; Leithwood et al., 1993; Luckhurst & Lauback, 2006; Till & Valladolid, 1978; Williams, 1978). Broderick (2012) even recommends having students as part of the collaboration team if the problem involves them. It is critical that only “problem-relevant knowledge” (Leithwood et al., 1993, p. 372) be used when collaborating in the problem solving process, so as not to get sidetracked by irrelevant information.

**Site-based management.** The shifting of decision-making authority from the district level to the school level is known as site-based management (Meyer, 2009; Monk, Pijanowski, & Hussain, 1997; Wohlstetter & McCurdy, 1991). Monk et al. described site-based management as “school-based management, school-site management, school-site autonomy, shared decision-making, shared governance, school improvement program, school-based budgeting, and administrative decentralization” (1997, p. 56). The people involved in site-based management are usually known as the school site counsel and they have control over the decisions made for the school, including budget and spending. The success of this type of management system requires that everyone who is involved in implementing the decisions also be a part of the counsel, including the “principal, teachers, parents, school board members, and district-level
staff” (DiNatale, 1994, p. 79). District administrations need to support, assist, and serve as a behavior model to the counsel (DiNatale, 1994).

**Districts’ special education knowledge and views that impact their decision-making.** School administrators are in charge of creating a school climate that is accepting of all students, but many administrators “have little knowledge of the specific learning theories and teaching strategies used with children who have special needs” (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004, p. 1). Balt (2000) and Wigle and Wilcox (2002) agree that administrators are lacking in their knowledge of special education. Part of this is due to the fact that administrator degree programs lack preparation in special education (Balt, 2000; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Nelson, 2002; Quigney, 1997; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994) and that classes on special education law are not a requirement for licensure (Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Valesky & Hirth, 1992). Some superintendents have never even taken a special education course, while others have not taken one since their undergraduate degree (Volphe, 2006). Bravenec (1998); Mostert and Crockett (1999); Nelson (2002); Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, and Hilton (2006); Valesky and Hirth (1992); and Volphe (2006) feel that administration leadership programs should include special education coursework. Wade and Gargiulo (1990) agree that administrators need training in the area of special education. This is necessary since administration is responsible for making decisions regarding the education of students with special needs.

With regard to special education law, most administrators report they have moderate knowledge or are aware of the key points of the laws (Chandler & Utz, 1982; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). In a study done by Outka (2010) to determine superintendents’ knowledge of special education issues, superintendents reported that they were more knowledgeable in the special education areas of funding and collaboration. The superintendents felt that these two
areas in regard to special education were critical for them to know about. These same superintendents reported that areas of special education that they were not as knowledgeable about included students with severe disabilities, pre-referrals process, and service models (Outka, 2010).

Keller-Allen (2009) found that school superintendents felt that in order to have a successful special education program, collaboration between general and special educators was essential. The superintendents reported that their personal and work experiences formed their beliefs about special education and the importance of collaboration. According to the superintendents Keller-Allen (2009) interviewed, the whole school district’s main goal should be focusing on all student learning and achievement.

Various strategies district administrations employ to support special education in their districts. In Keller-Allen’s study (2009), superintendents reported implementing certain strategies in their districts to promote and support collaboration. These included co-teaching, creating professional learning communities, hiring staff with collaboration backgrounds, ensuring all new hires regardless of their position are aware of special education issues, implementing common planning time, responding to intervention, and professional development. Superintendents also felt that reorganization of the district’s administration office structure was necessary, since restructuring and combining departments “helped staff think differently to foster collaboration, collective responsibility and high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students” (Keller-Allen, 2009, p. 6). Superintendents recommended starting with small changes and utilizing student data to make decisions to improve collaboration between general education and special education (Keller-Allen, 2009). Support from school administration is necessary to
ensure that inclusion is implemented and accepted by school staff (Hooper, Pankake, & Schroth, 1999; Idol, 2006).

**Funding.** The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 and 2004 mandated how states distribute their special education funds. “Special education funding is the amount of money allocated for the delivery of specially designed instruction and related services to students with disabilities who are eligible for such services” (Ahearn, 2010, p. 1). Funding comes from local education agencies, the state government, and the federal government (Ahearn, 2010; Monk et al., 1997; Parrish & Chambers, 1996). The number of children who receive special education services determines how much federal funding the state receives (Parrish & Chamber, 1996). States use various formulas, such as multiple student weights, census-based, single student weights, no separate special education funding, resource-based, combination, percentage reimbursement, and block grant to decide how to distribute their funding (Ahearn, 2010). In Massachusetts, a census-based formula is used. This means there is “a fixed dollar amount per total enrollment” (Ahearn, 2010, p. 3). At the district level, the school board is in charge of spending decisions, though they take into account the superintendent’s recommendations (Monk et al., 1997).

**Issues related to allocation of funds.** Since states do not have to report their special education funding to the federal government, little is known about special education spending (Scull & Winkler, 2011). At one time, the federal government did collect data, but it has since stopped because states were having trouble obtaining the data from the school districts and the reliability of the data was questionable (Parrish & Chambers, 1996). In addition, it is difficult for school districts to “divide expenditures accurately between special and general education” (Parrish & Chambers, 1996, p. 121) due to the move for integration of special education students
and their services into the general education classrooms (Jordan, Weiner, & Jordan, 1997). If school districts find that their special education programs are under-funded, they have to use funding allotted for non-special education programs to fund special education services, since they are required to provide these programs and services (Jordan et al., 1997). Chambers, Parris, Esra, and Shkolnik (2002) reported that in terms of district special education spending, smaller school districts and rural districts spent more than large and urban districts.

**History of Special Education**

Special education has come a very long way over the course of history. In ancient Greek and Roman times, being born with a disability would be in most cases an instant death sentence. Later, many societies viewed people with disabilities as being cursed by the devil. Institutions were established to give those with a disability a place to live and to help protect society from them. In certain areas, the disabled were considered a form of amusement, even after formal schools were set up to educate them (Winzer, 1993).

Special education rapidly evolved in the 20th century due to the civil rights movement, court cases, and federal laws. At the start of the century, students with mild forms of disability were educated in the classroom without services, and those who were severely disabled were either not educated at all or lived at private institutions. Even by the 1950s when special education classes were established in public schools, the students were viewed as unable to learn academically and mainly taught manual skills (Friend & Bursuck, 1999). With Brown v. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court ruled that separate education is not equal for African American students. Soon after, people with disabilities were also recognized as a population being discriminated against, since they were denied access to education due to their disability. Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevented “discrimination
against all individuals with disabilities in programs that receive federal funds” (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 6). This law was expanded in 1990 and renamed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). While it does not directly deal with the education of people with disabilities, it does prevent discrimination and require public places to be accessible to all people.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act required all students, regardless of their disability, to be granted free and appropriate education. This law ensured that students with disabilities were educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), created categories to classify disabilities, and established a procedure for determining if a student had a disability and the services to which students with disabilities were entitled. The law ensured that each student requiring specialized education would be given an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was amended in 1986 to expand the rights of children with disabilities from birth to five years old and to include early intervention services.

This law was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and the focus became more child-centered. With IDEA the term “disabled” replaced “handicapped,” new categories of disabilities were established, the classroom teacher was considered part of the student’s educational team, and students with disabilities were required to be assessed like their peers on statewide or local assessments. This law was amended seven years later. Changes to IDEA as a result of the amendment included: increasing family involvement in the student’s education, requiring special education eligibility to be reviewed every three years, changing the IEP to include transitional planning for students starting at 14 years old, and reviewing student discipline issues. In addition, the two main focuses of IDEA 1997 were that students with disabilities should be educated in the same classrooms as their peers and that the education outcome for students with and without disabilities should be the
Funding regulations changed as well, making states “change their funding formulas for supporting local school districts by removing incentives for placing students in more (rather than less) restrictive environments” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1998, p. 79). Due to this change, funding was also allotted to train general education teachers who would be educating students with disabilities in their classrooms. For these reasons, even though there is no mention of inclusion in the 1997 amendment to IDEA, it has been thought of as the “Inclusion Development and Expansion Act” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1998, p. 79).

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was passed. Like IDEA, it required that students be educated in the least restrictive environment and have access to the general education curriculum. In addition, IDEIA added aspects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), including “that all students have access to highly qualified teachers to create a context for general and special educators to collaborate to provide students access to core content in general education classes” (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005, p. 34).

**Current Best Practices in Special Education**

The definition of best practice must be established before determining what the current best practices in special education are. The term “best practice” was first used in special education literature in the early 1980s to discuss the programs and evaluation practices for the severely disabled. Best practice was defined by Fox, Thousand, Williams, Fox, Towne, Reid, Conn-Powers, & Calgagni (1986) as the strategies and methods that educators use to deliver education and other related services (as cited in Peters & Heron, 1993). Today, Peck and Scarpati (2010) define best practice as “classroom teaching and management techniques which have been shown to accomplish specific goals in an efficient and effective manner” (p. 4).
Terms that have been used synonymously with best practice include: most promising practice, emerging strategies, and exemplary strategies. The term best practice is utilized to determine or define the effectiveness of education and teacher education programs, exemplary methods, strategies, and programs, and integration potential. The following criteria should be considered when determining if something is best practice: expert opinion (taking into account that it could be biased or conflicting), empirical research support, values based, theoretically based, consensus in existing literature, desired outcome was produced, and socially valid (Peters & Heron, 1993). Narrative research syntheses and meta-analytic syntheses are better methods of research design when determining best practice because they use logic and reason when forming their judgment, unlike experimental design (Spaulding, 2009). In terms of this paper, best practices discussed will include program models and education strategies.

**Inclusion.** The federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which later became IDEA, required that students be educated in the LRE. While some people might assume that LRE is synonymous with inclusion, it actually is not and inclusion is not mentioned in IDEA (Borthwick-Duffy, Palmer, & Lane, 1996; Yell, 1998). Even so, for most students inclusion is the LRE, which is why it has been a major reform movement in education (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Biklen, 1985; Cole & Meyer, 1991; Ferguson, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sailor et al., 1989; Slavin, 1997; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). The National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) (1994) defined inclusion as:

the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe handicaps, in their neighborhood school, in age-appropriate general education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child and the teacher)
both to assure the child’s success – academic, behavioral, and social – and to prepare the child to participate as a full and contributing member of the society (p. 1-2).

Inclusion is considered a best practice in special education because by being educated in the general classroom, the students receive academic support, are able to learn along with their peers, build social relationships, and develop their self-esteem. The social skills of students with disabilities improve because they are able to observe others and practice their own skills (Arthur-Kelly, Foreman, Bennett, & Pascoe, 2008; Jenkins, Odom, & Speltz, 1989). Inclusion also benefits the non-disabled students, since increased exposure to peers with various differences allows them to become more accepting of people with differences (Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Henderson, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004).

According to the NCERI (1994) National Study of Inclusive Education, the following criteria are necessary for a program to be successful: funding, visionary leadership, support for staff, professional development, preparation time, collaboration, parent involvement, adapting curriculum and instruction, and assessment. Funding is necessary to ensure there is the opportunity for efficient support to meet the needs of the students in the inclusion setting (Fletcher-Campbell, Pijl, Meijer, Dyson, & Parrish, 2003; Henderson, 1994; Pijl & Frissen, 2009; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). Having leadership that believes in inclusion and helps guide it rather than opposing or forcing it is also critical (Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Henderson, 1994; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, & Liebert, 2006; Stanovich, 1996; Waldron, McCleskey, & Redd, 2011; Walther-Thomas, Bryant, & Land, 1996). Adequate support for staff is the next criterion (Cherian & Daniel, 2008; Correa &
Staff members need professional development and time to prepare for their classes (Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Henderson, 1994; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Kaff, 2004; McLeskey, 2011; Peters, 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996; Weiner, 2003). Student support can consist of aides and assistive technology. With proper support, teachers are better able to collaborate with their peers and other school personnel. Collaboration is essential in inclusion (Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005b; Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009; Cook & Friend, 1991; Downing, 2006; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend, 2000; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kaff, 2004; Patterson et al., 2008; Snell, Martin, & Orelowe, 1997; Weiner, 2003; West & Cannon, 1988). Parental involvement is also essential (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Henderson, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Peters, 2004; Pijl & Frissen, 2009; Ross-Hill, 2009; Salend, 2006; Stanovich, 1996). To ensure that students are being educated to the best of their ability and that they are equal participants in the classroom, teachers need to vary instructional methods and the educational strategies they use to meet the needs of the students with special education, as well as modify curriculum and employ accommodations to material and information (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004; Henderson, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997). The way classroom assessments are done needs to change so that the students are measured against themselves and not each other (Henderson, 1994; Peters, 2004). This helps determine and monitor individual growth. Once these criteria are met, inclusion benefits the students and school community, as well as increases parents’ satisfaction with the school and the services provided to their children.

Severely disabled. While not a large population in special education, students with severe disabilities, also known as profound disabilities and multiple disabilities, are another
population for whom inclusion has been identified as best practices (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2008; Halvorsen & Sailor, 1990; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Salend, 2001). Arthur-Kelly, Foreman, Bennett, and Pascoe (2008) and Borthwick-Duffy, Palmer, and Lane (1996) stress that the goals for these students should be different from the goals for students with moderate special needs. These goals should focus on improving the quality of life and should include communication and social interaction. When placed in an inclusive setting versus a substantially separate setting, there is more interaction through communication with peers. The communication is a higher quality, allowing these students with special needs to work on their social skills (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 1989). It is important for severely disabled students to be in an inclusion setting because “how, why, and under what circumstances a person engages with others is relevant to all learning and participation” (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2008, p. 163).

**Co-teaching.** Co-teaching, also known as collaborative teaching, cooperative teaching, or team teaching, is an effective model of inclusion (Austin, 2001; Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Carlson, 1986; Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Embury & Kroeger, 2012; Fennick, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Walsh, 1991; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996). It transpires in an inclusion setting and is “an instructional arrangement in which two or more teachers share responsibility for a group of students” (Friend & Bursuck, 1999, p. 82). One teacher is the general/content teacher and the other is a special educator or service provider (Conderman & Bresnahan, 2007; Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Salend, 2001; Turnbull, Turnbull, Shank, & Leal, 1999) and they share responsibility and accountability for educating all the students in the class (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Salend, 2001; Turnbull et al., 1999).

**Autism programs.** Autism spectrum disorder, more commonly known as autism, is a growing disability group. School systems have been developing programs to educate autistic
students in their town schools instead of in private autism schools. Autism programs that are considered best practice have many similar elements to those of inclusion’s best practice elements. The curriculum should include the necessary grade level content and should explicitly teach communication, transition, and social skills (Baker, 2005; Humes, 2008; Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Olley, 1999; Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007; Weiss, 2007). In addition, the program should utilize a functional approach to the challenging behaviors that students with autism tend to have (Dunlap, Newton, Fox, Benito, & Vaughn, 2001; Iovannone et al., 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Another element of a good autism program is a highly supportive teacher environment (Lynch & Irvine, 2009) and detailed generalizations strategies, because the students respond better to being taught in a structured way (Iovannone et al., 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). Lastly, family involvement is a critical element since it helps ensure consistency and maintain the skills students use in school over time (Dunlap et al., 2001; Iovannone et al., 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009). In addition, workshops and support for parents outside of school are critical (Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Dawson & Osterling, 1997).

**Problem-solving approach.** Friend and Bursuck (1999); Miller, Tansy, and Hughes (1998); Nunn and McMahan (2001); and West and Cannon (1988) suggest school staff collaborate using the problem-solving approach when determining how best to help a student reach a behavioral or academic goal. The Special Education Team, which is usually the IEP team, uses this method to identify the student’s needs and develop solutions to implement. In this method, the focus is on the problems the student faces relating to their day-to-day school life instead of on diagnosing and labeling the student or his/her problem. Once the problem is identified and strategies to improve the behavior are implemented, frequent and ongoing evaluations are conducted to determine the impact of the intervention towards the outcome.
The problem-solving approach is considered best practice because it comprises different components that are considered best practice in education today (Ross, 1995; Shaw & Swerdik, 1995). A team approach, which involves the school members and the parents in the process of identifying and working on fixing the problem, is taken (Carter & Sugai, 1989; Kabler & Carlton, 1982; Shaw & Swerdik, 1995; Simpson, Whelan, & Zabel, 1993). The best practice methods of collaboration (Carter et al., 2009; Cook & Friend, 1991; Downing, 2006; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend, 2000; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kaff, 2004; Patterson et al., 2008; Snell et al., 1997; Weiner, 2003; West & Cannon, 1988) and parent involvement (Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Henderson, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Peters, 2004; Pijl & Frissen, 2009; Ross-Hill, 2009; Salend, 2006; Stanovich, 1996) are used. Since specific goals for the various interventions are determined by the team, this approach is outcome oriented (Carta, Schwartz, Atwater, & McConnell, 1991; Stitchter, Crider, Moody, & Kay, 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Welner, 2010). The team creates functional assessments and uses them as a way to evaluate the interventions the team has put into place. Finally, it uses ongoing monitoring of progress (Etscheidt, 2006; Stecker, Lembke, & Foegen, 2008). The team is frequently monitoring the progress the student is making to determine if the interventions and products put into place are working and to use that information to find any trends (Nunn & McMahan, 2001).

**Transition planning.** Transition planning became a required part of the IEP in the 1990 IDEA. Thoma, Held, and Saddler (2002) believed that using transition assessments made writing the transition planning portion of the IEP easier, because the assessment collects data about the student’s strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Results from assessments should be shared with the student in order to help build their self-determination and self-esteem. Self-determination is considered best practice because by learning about their strengths, weaknesses,
and interests, a student is better equipped to self-advocate, come up with ideas, and plan for their future (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Denney & Daviso, 2012; Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Salend, 2001; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). In addition, building students’ self-determination helps them become successful adults. While self-determination is linked with transition planning, which starts when the student is 14 years old, Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999); Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1998); and Wehmeyer (2002) argued that promotion of this skill is beneficial for all students, no matter their skill level, and should start in elementary school.

**Individualization.** Spaulding (2009) stressed that individualization is the key term in special education. Services, programs, accommodations, and modification all need to be individualized to fit the needs of the student. It is critical to remember that no matter what is considered best practice by research, the individual needs of the child need to be taken into account by the team when determining which products, programs, and methods to put into place for the child (Spaulding, 2009; Zigmond, 2003).

**Current Challenges in Special Education**

Challenges in special education are found at the government, district, and classroom level.

**Certified teachers.** Research shows that there is a shortage of fully certified teachers, especially in the area of special education (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005a; Brownell et al., 2005b; Cegelka & Alvarado, 2000; Kaff, 2004; Lenihan, 2010; McCray et al., 2011). Factors leading to this shortage include the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements on a teacher to be deemed highly qualified, the need for dual certification when
working in special education at the secondary level, and the fact that special education teachers are more likely than their general education peers to leave their position.

**Funding.** Special education funding comes from state and school districts. In 2005, roughly 21 percent of education spending went towards special education (Scull & Winkler, 2011). Funding is limited, and how and where the funding is dispersed can vary. Little is known about how states spend their funds in regard to special education, because they are not required to report this information to the federal government (Scull & Winkler, 2011). Therefore, cost is a challenge in special education (Berman, Davis, Koufman-Frederick, & Urion, 2001a; Earles-Vollrath, 2004; Kaff, 2004; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Peters, 2004; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Special education standards have increased, but “state and federal funding have not always risen proportionately to assume their fair share” (Parish & Wolman, 2004, p. 66) and “federal and state governments [refuse] to appropriate the money authorized for special education” (Chandler & Utz, 1982, p. 54). Another reason special education costs have increased is due to the fact that more students have significant special needs and as a result require more expensive services (Berman et al., 2001a; Berman, Davis, Koufman-Frederick, & Urion, 2001b).

Due to limited state funds, support for students with disabilities is reduced. This can cause proponents of one disability group of special education to turn on another group, since they are in competition for the same limited funding (Lynch & Irvine, 2009). At the district level, programs, personnel, services, and related aid that a student with special education may require cost the school district money. When considering services, if there is a service that costs less and provides the same benefit, it should be considered. However, cost should never be a factor in selecting the services the child requires (Earles-Vollrath, 2004).
Lack of awareness. Another current challenge in special education is that IEP team members are not fully aware of or do not understand what related services are available and when to provide them (Earles-Vollrath, 2004; Dodge, Keenan, & Lattanzi, 2002; Fish, 2004; Fisher & Gardner, 1999; Malone & Gallagher, 2008). IDEA provides a list of possible related services, but not all school districts and their personnel understand that these are just examples and that other services can be considered (Earles-Vollrath, 2004). School administrators and teachers are not always aware of the services that are available for the students (Dodge et al., 2002; Fisher & Gardner, 1999). Parents are also unaware of the different services their child might qualify for or benefit from (Fish, 2004; Fisher & Gardner, 1999; Malone & Gallagher, 2008).

Inclusion. While inclusion is accepted as a current best practice trend, it is important to remember that inclusion does not automatically mean least restrictive environment (Borthwick-Duffy et al., 1996). Some special education organizations and authors have voiced their concerns over inclusion placements; they have stressed the importance of recognizing individual differences when determining placement (Borthwick-Duffy et al., 1996; Thompkins & Deloney, 1995). They argued that inclusion is sometimes viewed as a one size fits all approach, and that it should not be. Borthwick-Duffy et al. (1996); Cohen (1994); Ewing and Jones (2003); Innes (1994); Liu (1995); and Thompkins and Deloney (1995) felt that inclusion was not beneficial for students who are deaf or deaf with multiple disabilities, but instead they felt these students should be educated in separate classes or schools. In those settings, the students are able to be taught by teachers and support staff who have been educated and trained specifically for educating deaf students. Students are being exposed to the deaf language, culture, and
community. Socialization is better for deaf students in separate settings, because they are able to communicate with their peers independently.

**Lack of training.** With more students with special needs being placed in general classes, Austin (2001); Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, and Scheer (1999); Chaisson, Yearwood, and Olsen (2006); and Kosko and Wilkins (2009) reported that teachers felt that they were not prepared to meet the needs of these students. In addition, teachers were not prepared to collaborate with their colleagues (Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Embury & Kroeger, 2012; Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Schneider, 2007; Vaugh, Shay Schumm, & Arguelles, 1997) or with parents (Murray, Curran, & Zeller, 2008), since they were not taught how to collaborate. Teachers wished they knew more about special education and the facets that go along with it, including individualized instruction and behavior management, and they wanted training in these areas (Campbell & Halbert, 2002).

**Self-determination.** Special education teachers struggle with how to teach the skill of self-determination (Bambara, Cole, & Koger, 1998; Denney & Daviso, 2012; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004; Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, & Tamura, 2002; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000). Self-determination is “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influences or interferences” (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 24). The problem is that special educators state that they are not “familiar with techniques and strategies that facilitate student self-determination in the transition process” (Thoma et al., 2002, p. 242). Therefore, in addition to teachers not being comfortable with teaching this skill, this issue snowballs and affects a student’s IEP.

Self-determination is a critical component in writing the transition planning section of a student’s IEP when they turn 14 years old. As a result, when it comes time to discuss transition
at the IEP meetings, special educators and other team members tend to either take too much or too little control over the transition planning (Martin et al., 2006; Thoma et al., 2002). The special educator and team usually end up creating this IEP section without much input from the student (Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al., 2006; Thoma et al., 2002).

**Discipline.** In 1997, IDEA was revised to include a mandate regarding discipline for students with special needs. If a student has a challenging behavior that impacts their learning or the learning of others, a functional behavior assessment (FBA) needs to be done to create a behavior intervention plan (BIP) (Turnbull et al., 1999). Prior to 1997, FBAs were utilized for students with significant disabilities or limited cognitive abilities (Gable, 1999). Quinn et al. (2001) raised concerns as to whether FBAs could be utilized for higher functioning students.

School personnel lack the training necessary to create FBA and BIP plans (Conroy, Katsiyannis, Clark, Gable, & Fox, 2002; Crone, Hawken, & Bergstrom, 2007; Fallon, Zhang, & Jim, 2011; O’Neill & Stephenson, 2009; Van Acker, Boreson, Gable, & Potterton, 2005). As a result, FBAs and BIPs are not utilized correctly (Van Acker et al., 2005). While the student’s whole IEP team should be part of the FBA and BIP process, this does not always happen (O’Neill & Stephenson, 2009; Van Acker et al., 2005). Sometimes it is left up to one person, or the whole team is not represented.

**Parents.** Parents have vocalized their concerns and challenges with special education. As a student continues through special education, a shift is made from a family center approach to services at the early intervention level to more child-centered as the child progresses through school. As a result, parents feel less connected (Hollums, Pruitt, & Wandry, 1998). With regard to their child’s IEP and services, many parents feel that they are not individualized enough and
therefore do not fully meet their child’s needs (Kasari, Freeman, Bauminger, & Alkin, 1999; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Ryndak, Downing, Morrison, & Williams, 1996). In addition, they feel that schools do not do enough to increase parent involvement in the special education process (Kasari et al., 1999; Ryndak et al., 1996). Parents feel that communication needs to improve, since it tends to be sporadic and is usually only initiated for a negative report (Applequist, 2009; Kasari et al., 1999).

Parents who do not attend their child’s IEP meetings present a challenge in special education. While not a concern voiced by parents, this is a concern to the school district (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). This is deemed a lack of family participation (Campbell & Halbert, 2002). Parents’ involvement in their child’s education is part of IDEA.

Suggestions for Addressing Current Challenges in Special Education

Just as there are researchers exploring the current problems in special education, there are also researchers determining methods to solve the problems. Research has determined areas of concern currently being reviewed for improvement.

Funding. Fixing special education funding challenges is not easily done. Berman, Davis, Koufman-Frederick, and Urion (2001a) stressed the importance of reforming special education finances as a way to fix special education costs. They suggested that the federal government “must meet the commitment set in the initial legislation and provide 40% of the excess cost of special education” (Berman et al., 2001a, p. iv) and that states must review their special education funding formula. Berman, Davis, Koufman-Frederick, and Urion (2001b) proposed that “the local community pay the educational costs and the state or federal government pay for medical, psychiatric, physical therapy, and/or occupational therapy services” (p. 209).
Since advocacy groups for specific disabilities share a common goal of wanting the best education for the child, Lynch and Irvine (2009) suggest that they should band together. In doing so, they would form one large group that can “advocate for increased supports for all children within the general education system” (Lynch & Irvine, 2009, p. 853).

Suggestions made by Parrish and Wolman (2004) to improve the current challenges relating to special education funding at the district level include: pooling all educational funds, accepting accountability for all, trying to collaborate within the district and within the region, appealing to the policymakers at the state and federal level for support, and utilizing state provisions. Instead of changing special education funding formulas, Greene (2007) suggested changing who receives the funding and utilizing vouchers. Students would be given a voucher, containing the amount it would cost to educate them in a public school, which they could apply toward the tuition of a private school. Mittnacht (2005) suggested that instead of focusing on special education funding, general education funding should be increased. By increasing funding to general education, there will be more resources available in general education and less need for special education services; thus less funding would be needed for special education.

Certified teachers. Some states have gotten around the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirement of fully certified teachers by creating alternative ways for people to obtain their teaching certification (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; McCray et al., 2011; Snell et al., 1997). These new routes to certification, including conditional or emergency licenses, remove some requirements and lower the standards for certification. Non-degree licensure training programs help teachers who have gone this alternative route to become highly qualified, as NCLB requires (Cegelka & Alvarado, 2000; McCray et al., 2011, Snell et al., 1997).
Preparing teachers. To help teachers with the diverse needs they face in their classrooms and the different teaching models, Austin (2001); Buell et al., (1999); Dieker and Berg (2002); Fennick and Liddy (2001); Kaff (2004); and West and Cannon (1988) wrote that higher education institutions needed to review their teacher preparation programs to ensure that they promoted and educated about collaborative teaching and inclusion models. Chaisson et al. (2006); Dieker and Berg (2002); Fennick and Liddy (2001); Hudson-Ross and Graham (2000); McCray et al., (2011); Patterson, Syverud, and Seabrooks-Blackmore (2008); Sandoval (1996); Schneider (2007); Snell, Martin, and Orelvo (1997); and Stang and Lyons (2008) felt that universities should utilize co-teaching courses to better prepare future teachers for the diversity they find in the classroom. College professors work together to teach, so that the students experience firsthand what co-teaching looks like in the classroom. Colleges also need to incorporate training in FBA and BIP planning techniques (Fallon et al., 2011; Stichter, Shellady, Sealeander, & Eigenberger, 2000) and parent/family relationship building (Murray et al., 2008) into their teacher programs. If the teachers are already out of school, school districts should provide in-service programs on educating all students, working collaboratively (Austin, 2001; Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend et al., 2010; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; West & Cannon, 1988), and in FBA planning (Crone et al., 2007; Dukes, Rosenberg, & Brady, 2008).

Acceptance by all. Fullan and Miles (1992) and Weiner (2003) argued that all the stakeholders needed to be on board in order for special education to change at the school level. This includes but is not limited to administration, teachers, parents, students, and school staff. They need to believe in the change and to understand that their attitudes and beliefs towards change can negatively harm the outcome.
Parents. Recommendations for improvement have also been made concerning parent and school relations with regard to special education. Increasing parent involvement in school will help parents realize that they are members of their child’s education, and hopefully will encourage them to attend their child’s IEP meetings (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Special educators need to listen to the parents and to remember that they have an understanding of their child, even though they lack the educational training, so they should be viewed as an equal (Fish, 2008; Hollums, Pruitt, & Wandry, 1998; Staples & Diliberto, 2010). This is especially true during the IEP process. Special educators need to remember that parents are part of the IEP team and need to work with them. Therefore, they should talk with parents, not lecture at them, and avoid using education jargon (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; Fish, 2008; Hollums et al., 1998; Ryndak et al., 1996).

Parents feel that educators should stay up-to-date on information and research about the specific disability the child has (Esquivel et al., 2008; Hollums et al., 1998). When communicating with parents, the teacher needs to focus on quality and quantity (Hollums et al., 1998; Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Parents would like frequent contact, including some positive feedback. It is also critical to be sensitive to the family’s needs (Hollums et al., 1998). Each family is different, and it is important to be sensitive to their make up and dynamics (Hollums et al., 1998). Parents feel it is important that special educators treat their child with respect and that they be knowledgeable of the child’s interests and strengths (Esquivel et al., 2008; Hollums et al., 1998; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Homework. Lack of homework completion is another area of concern in special education. Various strategies can be implemented on the part of the school, teacher, student, and parent to improve homework completion. The school needs to have a homework policy in place
for all students (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Cooper & Nye, 1994). Bryan and Burstein (2004) found that homework completion improved if more severe consequences for not doing homework were put into place. Schools should invest in computer programs that allow teachers to post homework and grades for parents to view (Bursuck et al., 1999; Epstein, Munk, Bersuck, Polloway, & Jayanthi, 1999). Students should record their assignments in a homework notebook (Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998; Bursuck et al., 1999), and they should determine what a good homework environment is for them (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Epstein et al., 1999). In addition, students can create a homework graph to chart homework that was done on time, late, or not at all, and parents should review it weekly with them (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001; Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Bryan & Sullivan-Burstein, 1998). Increasing parent involvement in homework monitoring is another key step in increasing homework completion (Cooper & Nye, 1994; Bryan et al., 2001).

**Technology.** Technology can be used both by teachers and students to help fix some of the challenges they face. Teachers can use the Internet to locate information, tools, and resources that will help them educate students (Billingsley, Israel, & Smith, 2011). In addition, teachers can be given cell phones and laptops to communicate and provide services (Campbell & Halbert, 2002).

Teachers can also utilize assistive technology (AT) in the classroom to help the students academically (Gardner, Wissick, Schweder, & Smith Canter, 2003; MacArthur, 1996; Taylor, 2005; Wetzel, 1996). Since special education teachers are not always familiar or comfortable with AT, professional development in this area is essential (Taylor, 2005). When educators are confident and aware of the various AT available, they are more likely to suggest it for the students to use (Taylor, 2005). To ensure that the AT the IEP Team has determined necessary
for the student during the IEP meeting is actually used, the National Assistive Technology Research Institute created a form to be completed at the meeting (Bausch & Ault, 2008). It covers who is involved in implementing the AT, its equipment and status (who owns it or will be purchasing it), tasks related to the equipment (when and how it will be ordered and loaded), training that is needed, who needs training, who will do the training and when, and classroom implementation of the AT relating to which IEP goals it will address (Bausch & Ault, 2008).

Chapter III: Research Design

To answer the research question, the researcher used qualitative research to compare, contrast, and analyze the data collected across three suburban school districts in southeastern Massachusetts. This approach was selected because the researcher is the key instrument (Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2009) and the researcher wanted to collect data to identify similarities and differences across the three school districts investigated, primarily through the participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2007). The data collected was from the natural setting (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009) and since interviews were conducted, the data collected was in the form of words (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Research Question

The following research question was used to guide the processes of data collection and data analysis.

1. In the context of current expectations as set forth by federal legislation for providing special education students with appropriate instructional support, how do suburban school districts make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding district policies, services, programs, strategies, and use of resources to meet the needs of their special education students?
Contingency theory provided a framework in which to explore this question. The question investigated how the three school districts made decisions and adapted to mandates and changes, which are contingencies. All school districts faced the same mandates, but the ways in which each school district responded by implementing policies and programs differed. This question explored how the school districts made decisions regarding adapting to these contingencies.

Methodology

As stated at the beginning of this section, this was a qualitative study. This study was appropriate for the research question because a qualitative study looks to investigate the quality of the situation and provide all the details involved (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Through interviews, the researcher explored how school districts implemented the government special education mandates and how they met the needs of the students in their districts. A qualitative study was the practice-based research approach that best fit the research question and helped achieve the practical goals. Interviews are an important source of information gathering in a qualitative study, since the interviewee is able to provide information into these situations (Yin, 2009).

Site

Site and participants. Purposeful selection was used for this study. The sites of this qualitative study were three medium-sized, suburban public school districts in southeastern Massachusetts. Participants of the study were the stakeholders invested in the special education of the district’s special needs students. It is important to note that the districts used different titles for their administrators.
**Data collection.** Interviews were conducted with the school district administrators responsible for making decisions related to special education. Interview questions were asked to help gain an understanding of the school district’s special education policies and programs. The interviewees determined the time and location of the interview to help them feel comfortable during the interview.

An interview protocol was used during the interview. The top of the form (Appendix A) had a heading that indicated the date, interview location, interviewee name, and interviewee title. Written instructions for the researcher to follow were included at the top, so that the same “standard procedures [we]re used from one interview to another” (Creswell, 2009, p. 183). The questions were written out. The protocol included a statement that was read at the conclusion of the interview thanking the interviewees for their time (Creswell, 2009).

The interviews were structured according to a set of predetermined questions created prior to the interviews. Since the questions and the sequence of the questions were determined in advance and all the interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order, it was a standardized, open-ended, semi-structured interview that allowed for additional questions to be asked for greater clarity and definition as needed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Background questions about the interviewee, knowledge questions about factual information, and experience questions about what was currently done or had been done in the past were the types of questions that were asked (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The questions were carefully crafted so that they would “ensure that [the] participants [we]re given the maximum opportunity to present events and phenomena in their own terms” (Stringer, 2007, p. 72). The questions asked to gather information were open-ended, so that the interviewee had the opportunity to provide a full response in their own words (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Stringer, 2007). Extension and mini tour
questions were needed at times to prompt the interviewee to reveal more information or details about a topic mentioned. The interview questions were test piloted with a person in the special education field to help “determine if the questions work[ed] as intended to and what revisions” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93) were required. The interviewees did not have access to the questions prior to the interview.

At the start of the interview, the researcher attempted to develop a rapport with the interviewees and throughout the interview treated them with respect (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). During the interview, the researcher acted naturally and took care that her personal perspectives and interests did not taint the questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Stringer, 2007). Along these lines, the questions were free of judgment, criticism, or underlying cues. During the interview, only one question was asked at a time to ensure that the interviewees answered all the questions fully (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The interviewees were not interrupted while they were answering questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The researcher was aware of verbal and nonverbal tendencies, remained neutral throughout the time with the interviewees, and did not affirm or dispute any of the information they provided (Stringer, 2007). These actions would have made the interviewees uncomfortable or induced a negative reaction.

A digital recording device was used to record the interviews. Prior to attending the interview, the recording device was checked to ensure it was working and charged fully. On the day of the interview, the interviewees’ permission to record the interview was obtained on the record after introductions were made. One disadvantage of using a recording device was that some people might not have talked as freely when they were being recorded. While this was a concern, it was outweighed by the increase in the accuracy of documenting exactly what the interviewees said. The recorded interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the
interview. To ensure confidentiality, the recording and transcripts were kept in a safe place (Stringer, 2007). The audio recordings were deleted once they were transcribed. Recording the interviews ensured that all the information shared by the interviewees was collected accurately (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Since interviewees are human, they can be biased, have poor recall ability, and/or struggle to articulate their statements clearly (Yin, 2009). As a result, multiple stakeholders in each school district were interviewed, so that the interview data could be corroborated (Yin, 2009).

Data collection took three months (November 2013 – January 2014). In July 2013, a letter was sent to the superintendents via email expressing interest in using their districts in the study. The superintendents who agreed were then sent a follow-up letter via email in October and November 2013. When the superintendent agreed to allow their district to be part of the study, the district administrators involved with special education were contacted via email. Interviews were then scheduled with administrators who agreed to take part in the study.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis was an ongoing process that started at the beginning of the data collection period on November 2013 and lasted until April 2014. Analysis of the data was done by the researcher on a computer.

Hand coding of the transcripts can be “laborious and time-consuming,” (Creswell, 2009, p. 188), so a computer was utilized to organize the data using Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. First, the interview transcripts were reviewed to evaluate the data collected. As each transcript was reviewed, memos were written on the computer (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). These memos helped document the analytical thinking related to the data, and “facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). Each separate idea or concept
was blocked by highlighting the text a specific color and adding a comment. To help determine the ideas and concepts (which later became categories), descriptive words directly from the transcripts were selected (Creswell, 2009; Stringer, 2007). These words were put into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, which were labeled to identify the author and the idea or concept addressed. This process is known as *unitizing the data* (Stringer, 2007).

The information collected was sorted into groupings (first cycle coding). This was done by sorting words into categories and by grouping ideas and concepts into larger or smaller headings depending on the data (Stringer, 2007). Putting these categories and topics into columns helped visualize the information (Creswell, 2009). Coding was done to help arrange the data into categories that allow comparisons to be made between the items in the categories (Maxwell, 2005).

Data and themes from across the three school districts were then compared. To do this, themes were identified in the data across each school district (second cycle coding). This showed what stakeholders in different school districts had in common, as well as what was distinct among the three districts.

All the categories used were “so explicit that another researcher could use them to examine the same material and obtain substantially the same results” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 476). Other researchers should be able to find these topics based on common sense and past literature on the topic (Creswell, 2009). Coding groups included but were not limited to the following clusters: perspectives, programs, strategies, and relationships. These codes were used to determine themes and determine the meaning of what was learned (Creswell, 2007).
Validity & Credibility

To help ensure the validity of the data, the following strategies were used: vivid descriptions, discussions of the researcher’s bias, and peer debriefing. These strategies are described in more detail below. In addition, the interview questions were written in advance, interviews were recorded, and the sources of remarks and comments discussed in the paper were documented (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

Vivid descriptions, also known as thick descriptions or “rich” data, were used to describe the school districts that took part in the study; the interviewees’ educational, career, and special education background; and the context of the questions in vivid detail (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). This was done so that readers would be able to determine how transferable the information learned from the study is to other settings.

Peer debriefing, also known as a peer review or peer audit, is when a peer who was not connected to the research study reviews and evaluates the researcher’s report (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). After the peer debriefer reviewed the report, she determined the interpretations and conclusions were supported by the data.

Since “qualitative research is so dependent on the researcher in both collecting and interpreting information” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 433), researcher bias needed to be considered and discussed. Stating bias as the researcher was important (Creswell, 2009) so that the reader was aware of any “past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretations and approaches to the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). This qualitative study is biased because of familiarity with the topic explored. The researcher is a special education teacher and a former special education student. However, the experience as a special education student is not a tangible memory, since it was over twenty-two years ago. The
use of the various strategies previously mentioned to prove the validity of the data help to ensure that bias did not taint the study’s data.

Threats to internal validity include: mortality, location, and attitude of subject. In terms of mortality, not all the special education administrators had worked at the school district long enough to have been part of the decision-making process that led to the implementation of the services and programs currently offered. There were a limited number of special education administrators in each district available for the study, so any loss of a participant was a potential threat. The attitude of subjects was also a concern, because they may not felt comfortable talking about the challenges the district faced related to special education.

**Protection of Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations**

Since people were involved in the study, a plan outlining the study was completed for the Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB). It included a statement that the researcher would interact with the participants in the study and collect data through interviews (Yin, 2009). The information in the IRB proved that the researcher “respect[ed] the privacy and rights of participants to withdraw from the study and [did] not place them at risk” (Creswell, 2007, p. 44).

Approval was first gained from the school districts’ superintendents to use their districts in the study. This was done through written letters sent via email that provided an explanation of the study, the duration of the study, the potential impact to the district, and how the outcomes of the study would be utilized (Creswell, 2009).

Participation on the part of the superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of student services, and special education administrators at the elementary and secondary level was voluntary. Prior to the start of the research, participants’ permission was obtained through an informed consent form. It provided the participants with a written explanation of the
researcher’s role and a detailed overview of the study (Appendix B). This explained the purpose of the study, foreseeable risks and benefits, confidentiality protection, the duration of the study, and the participants’ right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time (Stringer, 2007). By signing this form, participants granted their permission and acknowledged their understanding of the information stated above.

Since the participants were interviewed, various aspects of the interview process from the participants’ point of view were considered (Creswell, 2009). Making sure the interview interaction was not stressful for the participant was important. This was done by interviewing them in a location of their choice, such as their office or conference room, so they were comfortable with their surroundings. In addition, the researcher considered “what the consequences of the interview for the interviewees and the groups to which they belong might be” (Creswell, 2009, p. 91). Explaining their special education procedures, programs, and practices should not have had a negative consequence for the interviewees, since most of this information was common knowledge that could be learned through school interactions, information available through the school websites, and at school functions. However, the process through which the district administrators determined the districts’ special education procedures, programs, and practices was not as well known. Thus the interviewees explained the thought processes behind the implementation of their special education programs.

Ethical challenges were faced in this study because of the researcher’s position as a special education teacher. Teachers are on the frontline in administering policies concerning special education but at the bottom of the top-down management structure that determines these policies. The researcher is personally invested in the problem of practice, the findings in the form of the answers that the participants provided, and the interpretation of the findings.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the interviews conducted in three medium-sized, suburban school districts in southeastern Massachusetts regarding how they make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding district policy, services, programs, and use of resources to meet the needs of their students with special needs. District administrators involved in special education decision-making in each of these districts were interviewed to gather data.

There are three sections in this chapter. The first section provides a description of each of the districts, the people interviewed, and the findings for each of the districts. Section two provides an analysis of the cross-cultural decision-making themes that emerged. The third section discusses the differences that emerged.

Study Context

Seventeen administrators were invited to participate in the study but only twelve agreed to be interviewed. In Town A, eight administrators were invited to be interviewed and five accepted. In Town B, six administrators were invited and four were interviewed. In Town C, three of the four administrators invited agreed to be interviewed. The administrators interviewed ranged from the superintendent to special education supervisors. All personnel interviewed hold a masters degree. Three hold CAGS (a certificate of advanced graduate studies). Three administrators hold a doctorate, and one administrator interviewed was in the process of writing her doctoral dissertation. Ten of the twelve administrators interviewed have taken a special education course and ten of the twelve have taken a special education law course.

The time interviewees had held their current positions in their respective districts ranged from four months to fourteen years. Five of the interviewees had held a similar position in a different town. Seven of the interviewees had held a different position in their current town. All
but one interviewee had held a job in education in a different school district. Eleven of the
interviewees had worked directly with students with special needs at some point in their career.

While each district used different titles for their administrators, the overall structure of
the administration was similar across districts. Each district had a superintendent and at least one
assistant superintendent. Each had a staff person who was in charge of special education;
however, the job titles differed. The job titles included Director of Student Support Services,
Director of Pupil Personnel Services, and Director of Student Services. Each district had staff
members at the administration level who served under the director and worked in a supervisory
role. Depending on the district, these roles were divided by school or clustered by grade. The
job titles also varied district to district. The job titles included Special Education Supervisor,
Department Chair of Student Services, Department Head of Student Services, and Special
Education Team Chair.

In the next sections, the three school districts’ special education administration interview
responses are reviewed. The themes and differences that emerged from the analysis of the
interviews are then presented.

**Town A Public Schools**

Town A is classified by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council as a maturing suburb
because it is an established suburb ("Massachusetts Community Types," 2008). Located fewer
than 15 miles south of Boston, Town A covers just over 11 square miles ("dhcd Town A,” 2013).
It is a relatively affluent community comprising mainly single family homes that sit on lots of
land ranging from three-fourths of an acre to one acre ("Massachusetts Community Types,”
2008). While there is new growth, it mainly comes from teardowns and redevelopment since the
town has limited vacant land that could be developed ("Massachusetts Community Types,”
In addition to the residential section, the town has retail, commercial, and industrial businesses (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008).

Town A’s population as of 2010 was roughly 14,500 (“2010 Demographic Profile,” 2010). Of the population, about 4,500 people were 19 years old or younger (“2010 Demographic Profile,” 2010). Racially, Town A consists of white (92.7%), Asian (5%), African American (0.9%), some other non-disclosed races, and American Indian and Alaska Native (“2010 Demographic Profile,” 2010). The mean income for families in Town A as of 2011 was almost $152,000 (“Community Facts - Economic,” 2012). Just over ten percent of families in the town make less than $50,000 a year, four percent of which earn less than $25,000 (“Community Facts - Economic,” 2012).

Town A Public School district is a PK-12 school district with 3,167 students enrolled as of the 2012-2013 school year (“Town A Enrollment,” 2013). The district includes one preschool, five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. All the elementary schools enroll grades kindergarten through fifth. In the 2011-2012 school year, the Town A Public School systems spent $14,197 per student (“2011-12 Per Pupil,” 2012). Town A is the most affluent town in the study and the only school district in the study whose high school is ranked by U.S. News & World Report on their list of best high schools in Massachusetts (“Massachusetts High Schools,” 2014).

In the 2010-2011 school year, 524 students enrolled in Town A Public Schools were on IEPs (“Town A – Special Education,” 2010). Of those, 392 were considered full inclusion (only removed from the general education classroom for a maximum of 20% of the day), 94 were partial inclusion (outside the general education classroom 21-60% of the day), 20 were substantially separate (inside the general education classroom 40% of the day), and 18 of the
students on IEPs were in separate schools, residential facilities, or were homebound/hospital placement (“Town A – Special Education,” 2010). The town has a Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC). This council has a website link on the town public school website; however, the most recent post on it was from January 2014. No information about the group’s meeting dates could be located on the website.

Five of the eight administrators approached to participate in this study agreed to participate. They included the superintendent, the acting assistant superintendent (the district has two assistant superintendents, one of whom works with special education), the out-of-district coordinator, one elementary special education department head (the district has two), and the middle school special education department head. The administrators interviewed had worked in Town A in their current position for between four months and nine years. The superintendent had worked in this town the longest, while the elementary special education department head had worked in the town the shortest. Only one, the acting assistant superintendent, had held another position in this town. He had been a principal of an elementary school for five years. In all, the range of experience in their current positions for these interviewees was four months to 14 years.

All the special education department heads and the out-of-district coordinator had previously held their same position in another school district and all three had worked as a special education teacher. Everyone except the superintendent had worked directly with special education students. All the interviewees held master degrees, one held a CAGS, and three held doctorates. The number of certifications held by the interviewees ranges from two to five, and all hold one appropriate to their current field of work. Everyone but the superintendent had taken special education classes, and the superintendent and the out-of-district coordinator are the only two who had not taken special education law courses. However, the out-of-district
coordinator had “gone to numerous conferences that have been presented by attorney groups.”

All the interviewees were welcoming to the researcher. They answered all the questions asked of them to the best of their ability. They acknowledged when they were not 100% sure or did not know an answer. When this happened, many times the interviewee would advise the researcher whom to ask to find the answer.

**How the system responds to special education mandates.** When Town A was faced with special education mandates from the state and federal government, the district followed a process to ensure that they met the new mandates. This process varied, as the superintendent explained it “would depend on [the] regulation and it obviously depends on the impact, whether it's going to impact everybody in this district or a particular sub-set of people.” When that mandate was related to special education, it was the role of the district’s director of student services, who did not agree to be interviewed as part of this study, to take the lead to ensure that these mandates were understood and met. The acting assistant superintendent explained that the director of student services would

- take the lead on any of those directives. She’ll meet with the administrative council, which is comprised of all of the principals in the district and with all of the special ed directors and/or special ed chairs to inform us of what the regulations are. And then we’ll disseminate out to our people what those regulations are and to make sure that we’re in compliance.

The elementary special education department head reiterated this “tiered approach” when she explained that

- usually our student services director is informed of these changes, and then we have an in-house leadership meeting to discuss them where all the special ed student service
administrations meet together and then we have department head meetings at each of our levels where we'll then share that information with our staff.

Through this process, the district ensured that the mandates were met and that any information or changes required were then distributed to the staff members whom they would directly and indirectly affect.

**How the district engages in decision-making regarding special education policies, programs, and practices.** It was stated by the acting assistant superintendent and the out-of-district coordinator that Town A’s director of student services was responsible for making decisions that would affect special education in the district; these decisions were affected by input from discussions with higher administration and special education directors. According to Cynthia, the out-of-district coordinator, the process usually started with the special education department because we know the needs of the kids the most. And then our special service director takes it from there and moves on up the line, has discussions with the superintendent and with the business manager and we all sort of weigh in with regard to finding out the best way to do it and the most financially sound way to do it. So it’s – it’s a team process.

When making special education decisions, the needs of the student were always on the forefront of the administrators’ minds. However, not all decisions or ideas originated at the administrative level. Sometimes the teachers who work directly with the students started the discussion about ideas or changes to be made. Cynthia further explained that sometimes it starts with the teachers who meet with the department heads, who meet with the special services director. And then it moves on up into the administration. But it’s a – kind of like a grassroots movement that really comes from the people in the trenches. They’re
the ones who say, ‘This is what we need. This is what’s not working. This is what I think might work.’ And then it’s up to us to kind of move it in the direction it needs to go.

While the teachers might bring information to their supervisors’ attention in Town A, they are not directly involved with the decisions relating to the changes or implementation of new programs and services. Town A did not follow one particular method when making decisions, but instead used a variety of methods that they implemented depending on the situation. When asked if the district utilized research methods mentioned in the study’s literature review, data driven/evidence based, problem solving process, or site-based management, the superintendent stated that

there's nothing that we name…but I'd say all those things you mentioned that it go without saying that we need it for the justification and rationale and sort of selling, selling of the idea. We obviously want to see data. I mean it’s just the twenty-first century education you can’t – you can't escape having data. We also want to see research. A lot of our decisions are researched based and it allows us to get our brain around it too, right?

I mean you think you have a need but the question is always, what there actually empirical evidence as a research that, that supports that this new program is actually going to make a difference.

This school district has a therapy dog in one of their high school programs, which was not exclusively for special education students, but special education students did attend the program. The superintendent explained the importance of research when he made the decision to allow the dog into the program. He stated that “the dog the – that was a research-based decision. The teacher who presented that as an option for these kids, he presented a mountain of research to me to justify that decision.”
Other people interviewed also discussed that trends in special education and in the needs of the school district’s special education population played a role in the decision-making process. Robin, the elementary special education department head, explained “that there are trends that inform [and] help us think about what we need.” The higher administration and special education administration had to consider these trends when making decisions related to programs and services offered in the school district for the special education population.

Everyone interviewed felt that the school district was proactive or premeditated when making special education decisions. Decision-making and advanced planning ensured that the appropriate programs and services were in place to meet the needs of the special education population in the school district. An example of the school district being proactive or premeditated was when the district looked at the future student population progression through their educational career to determine services and programs to offer. The superintendent referenced the district’s smaller special education population and the fact that many students remained in the school system for their whole K-12 education year as reasons why the district can be so proactive. He explained that they had “the luxury, if you will, being able to look ahead several years in some cases to make sure those kids are going to get services.”

Lorri, the middle school special education department head, provided a specific example of this when she explained that the middle school now had a program for students “with needs related to ASD [autism spectrum disorder]…because we had several students coming up from the elementary with those needs so we built the program for them.” In short, Cynthia, the out-of-district coordinator, summed up the school district’s view on special education decision-making when she said it had “a visionary goal-setting sort of approach where we look down the road, big picture.”
While everyone felt Town A’s public schools were proactive overall, the superintendent and acting assistant superintendent acknowledged that the district could be reactive in its decision-making process regarding special education. The acting assistant superintendent explained that whenever possible we try to be proactive. We try to anticipate the needs based on where our students are and adjust accordingly. But the reality of children are that they – they are different. So even children, so there are two big variables. One variable is students you currently have and how they change and grow from year to year. So there's that variable that requires different levels of response. Then the other variable [is] students who move in, who you have no idea about them until they're here and you have to adjust to meet their needs. So, we try our best to be proactive, but the fact is we have to be good at reacting as well.

He raised a point that the superintendent also made. While the district was able to be proactive with their decisions regarding the population of students they had moving up the system, they might need to make adjustments or make decisions as a reaction to a new student’s needs or a change in a current student’s needs. However, the superintendent felt confident that as of “right now we can provide services to pretty much any student that comes in the door.”

**Town A’s special education programs and services.** As a result of the school district’s responses to mandates and the decisions made regarding special education, Town A offered a variety of special education programs and services to meet the needs of the students in the town while meeting the state and federal mandates. Many of these services and programs were offered throughout the K-12 system. The district offered inclusion, pull out, and substantially separate programs at the elementary, middle, and high school level. At all grade levels, there were
programs for students on the autism spectrum, with severe and cognitive needs, or with emotional or behavioral needs. The autism program was individualized for the needs of each student. As Lorri, the middle school special education department head, explained, the programs “can be [substantially separate] if that's what the student needs but they also can be home bases and the majority of our kids are out in general ed for at least some part of the day.” At the elementary and middle school level there was a program for students with language-based learning disabilities. At the elementary school, the co-teaching model had been implemented in a few of the classrooms.

The district had multiple elementary schools and did not offer every substantially separate program at each elementary school. The superintendent explained that it's just really a way to create economies on scale and efficiencies…Efficiency and service…[The programs] do look different, depending on the school. And we basically transport kids in district to our in-district programs.

At the high school level, there was a program that focused on life skills and transition. Cynthia, the out-of-district coordinator, explained that the district was in the process of building this program for “14 through 22 age-level kids as they move up into the high school” so that the “kids stay in district, as opposed to moving on to private special education schools.” Additionally, the high school had a self-contained program for students with moderate disabilities.

In addition to these programs and services, Town A also offered speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological therapy, technology support, Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), counseling services, orientation mobility therapy, music therapy, vision support, and a van for community-based instruction.
Criteria for the identification of programs dependent on student needs. When asked if the district had specific, written criteria for deciding where to place a student at each grade level, the answers varied. The majority of the responses indicated that there were guidelines for each program at each grade level, as well as “descriptions and profiles of particular students that might benefit” from the program. The out-of-district coordinator stated that there were no specific entry and exit criteria, explaining that the district did not have “strict entry criteria, [because] we really try to stay away from that, really because we do look at kids as individuals.” Utilizing these guidelines, Town A made decisions as to which program would best meet the specific needs of each student.

Challenges. When asked what challenges the Town A school district faced with regard to special education, most of the interviewees mentioned the budget. Allan, the acting assistant superintendent, discussed the challenge of meeting the diverse needs of the students with special needs while dealing with a limited budget. He said, “There's constant pressure between wanting to support the students as best as you can with the financial realities of what that entails. So striking that balance probably is our greatest challenge.” The superintendent said that budget challenges were constraining, but that the school district's special education was not “missing anything right now. It's just that we [would] always like to do more and provide the gold standard at all times.” He stated that the town valued education and had high standards that the school district wanted to meet and exceed. Cynthia, the out-of-district coordinator, added that one challenge was that the state and federal government mandates were unfunded and that affected the budget. She said

Well, I think we’re not unlike any other district in this state, which would be these unfunded mandates that they keep handing us. And even though Town A is in a better
place financially, we’re still not. I mean, we still have budget concerns. It’s always a
difficult time of year when it’s time to talk about the budget.

Other concerns that directly related to the budget included the need for more space and
more staff. Lorri, the middle school special education department head, said the middle school
was “bursting at the seams” and that this was not directly a special education issue, but affected
special education program space. The superintendent mentioned his wish for more special
education staff: he said that “we never feel that we have enough…enough staff to actually
provide our dream level of service” and “we still have some teachers with caseloads that are too
high and in a perfect world and they're stretched thin and that…that has ramifications.”

The state’s mandated assessment, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System
(MCAS), was another challenge Town A faced with regard to the special education population.
Lorri, the middle school special education department head, mentioned that “right now here at
the middle school the MCAS scores for our special ed students are a concern, particularly math,
so we’re looking very closely [at that].” Scores for students with special needs were not as high
as those for students without special needs.

Robin, the elementary special education department head, brought up some challenges
that the district's special education department faced as a result of the school district being small.
With such a small school district, there were fewer students with similar needs, so creating
programs could be challenging. She said that

I think the challenge for small districts is that sometimes you have a kiddo of one. The
idea of a peer match is really hard and when you are thinking about a program, you might
create something and then wait like two years for other kids to fall into place or you
create something.
As a result of having a small special education population, the special programs are constantly changed to meet the needs of the current and/or upcoming population. Robin, the elementary special education department head, mentioned that due to this you [the district] have a good match with the teacher and the teacher wants to do something and then that cohort leaves and a new cohort comes in with different needs. Teacher[s] needs to be adaptable. So that's hard. You [the teacher] can't get a niche. This affected teachers because they got used to teaching and/or running a program a specific way, having made modification and accommodations to support a particular group of students with specific needs, and then that changed. The teacher then needed to start from scratch to ensure the new group’s needs were being met.

**Town A’s perspective on the future of special education.** The administrators in Town A constantly thought about what the future of special education would look like in their district. The superintendent, acting assistant superintendent, and out-of-district program coordinator said they would like to have all Town A school district students attend schools in the district. The out-of-district coordinator felt that the district was already working towards this with her “spearhead[ing] the return of some significantly disabled kids back into their home schools and communities with the total support of the high school.” The district ideally would work under the “principle of trying to keep as many of our students within the community as possible” according to the acting assistant superintendent. However, he acknowledged that this type of decision and change would need to be “based on…ensuring that [the students] all make effective progress and making sure they do it within a fiscally responsible manner.” While the superintendent felt the districts had “a goal of bringing everybody home to the neighborhood school,” he also discussed the feasibility of this by trying to figure out if “we [can] really sustain
a program that educates these kids who have a significant amount of both educational and – and medical needs, and emotional need, whatever it may be.”

Interviewees in Town A said they would also like to increase their transition planning programs to provide more for the 18- to 22-year old population to help ensure they become active members of society. The superintendent said that he would like the district to do “more to prepare them to kind of go to that next step whether it’s college or career or just like I said to be independent and productive members of society.” The out-of-district coordinator also mentioned that the town wanted to work with “community agencies, so that when the kids do turn 22, or actually get a diploma, that there is a place in their world that they can feel accomplished and important and become important members of society.” Administrators in Town A were also trying to plan for the students who would remain in the public school system until the age of 22. By the age of 18, a student was an adult and required different services and programs, as the superintendent explained. He said, “they're not really kids. I mean, they're adults. It's really adult – adult services, so we're finding that K-12s now have to bridge this gap between – between childhood and adulthood.” Areas Town A would explore to provide for these students in the future included more vocational and experiential learning opportunities. As the superintendent said, the goal for the school district was

that once they age out, again they can be – they can be protective, productive members of society. And those are for the kids that we know are going to be able to go live and hopefully live independently in the world.

With regard to the future of education in Town A, a major focus was the future of the students with special needs when they leave the school district.

While Town A already had some co-teaching in place, it was only done at the elementary
school level in some of the grades. The superintendent said he would “love to do more co-teaching” and this feeling was also expressed by the middle school special education department head. She explained that in terms of special education at the middle school, they “have our special ed teachers who are in the general ed classes but they’re not true co-teaching assignments here in this building” and that this was something she would like to see for the future of Town A. Technology was another area administrators in Town A said they would like to explore and increase the various technology offerings that the district already offered.

**Researcher’s take aways.** This researcher had three main take aways:

- Discussion was critical in decision-making, allowing for shared decision-making and input from the multiple stakeholders serving the district's special education students.
- Offices located in the school buildings allowed those in charge of decision-making regarding special education to directly observe the needs of the students and teachers in special education.
- The district was attempting to improve its special education programs to better serve their population and not have them be served out of district.

**Shared decision-making and discussion.** Through the interviews it was clear that the needs of students lead decisions in Town A. There was no top-down decision-making, but instead the director of student services included her special education department heads, who work firsthand with the teachers at the respective grade levels, in the discussions regarding decisions. Higher administration at the central administrator level, such as the superintendent and assistant superintendents, and administration at the school level are also part of discussions.

**Location, location, location.** The central administration office is located in the high
school, which is fewer than ten years old. The special education department heads have offices located in the schools they oversee. Having the administrators who are responsible for making the special education decisions in the same building as the students with special needs means they are able to directly view the needs of the students and teachers and see how the decisions they make affect the special education population.

**Trying to service all students in district.** Special education encompasses many disabilities and challenges. As a result, a school district, especially one on the smaller side, might not be able to meet the needs of all the students with special needs inside its schools. This was true of Town A. However, the superintendent, acting assistant superintendent, and out-of-district coordinator were trying to change this so that all students could be educated in the community in which they live. In order to do so, the programs offered need to be financially reasonable while meeting the students’ needs and ensuring that they progress academically. The district has already been able to return some students from out-of-district placements into programs at their home school.

**Town B Public Schools**

Town B is classified by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council as a developing suburb, since it is a maturing New England town (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008). Located 30 miles south of Boston, Town B covers just under 30 square miles (“dhed Town B,” 2013). It has a distinct town center, neighborhoods with houses on quarter-acre to half-acre lots, and still has room to grow (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008). New subdivisions are being developed and the town’s population is growing (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008).

Town B’s population as of 2010 was just over 19,000 (“2010 Demographic Profile – Town B,” 2010). Of the population, almost 5,500 were 19 years old or younger (“2010
Demographic Profile – Town B,” 2010). Racially, Town B consisted of white (94%), African American (1.8%), Asian (1.8%), other non-disclosed races (0.6%), American Indian and Alaska Native (0.1%), and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (0.1%) (“2010 Demographic Profile – Town B,” 2010). The mean income for families in Town B in 2011 was roughly $91,500 (“Community Facts – Economic Town B,” 2012). Families making less than $50,000 made up 21.6% of the population of the town, and 10.2% of those families made less than $25,000 (“Community Facts – Economic Town B,” 2012).

Town B Public School district was a PK-12 school district with 2,629 students enrolled as of the 2012-2013 school year (“Town B Enrollment,” 2013). The district includes one preschool, three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The elementary schools are divided into two kindergarten to grade three buildings and one fourth and fifth grade building. In the 2010-2011 school year, the Town B Public School systems spent $12,411 per student (“2011-12 Per Pupil,” 2012).

In the 2010-2011 school year, 499 students enrolled in Town B Public Schools were on IEPs (“Town B – Special Education,” 2010). Of those, 263 were considered full inclusion (only removed from the general education classroom for a maximum of 20% of the day), 146 were partial inclusion (outside the classroom 21-60% of the day), 46 were substantially separate (inside the classroom 40% of the day), and 44 of the students on IEPs were in separate schools, residential facilities, or were homebound/hospital placement (“Town B – Special Education,” 2010). The school district has a SEPAC and the group’s website is found on the school district’s website. The last upcoming event listed was in June 2014.

Seven administrators in Town B were approached to participate in the study, and of those five agreed to be interviewed. Only four were actually interviewed, because the wife of one of
the interviewees gave birth the day of the scheduled interview and no other time was able to be agreed upon. This person is one of the elementary special education chair people.

Administrators interviewed include the director of student services and special education team chairperson at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The superintendent and one elementary special education chairperson did not respond to the request to be interviewed.

The amount of time the interviewed administrators had been in their current position ranged from four months to nine years. Only the high school special education chairperson had held a similar position in a different school district. Everyone had worked in Town B in a different position than the one they currently held and everyone but the middle school special education chairperson had worked for a different school district at some time. The middle school special education team chairperson had previously worked for the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, now known as the Department of Children and Family. All the administrators interviewed held masters degrees and had worked directly with students with special needs at some point in their careers.

The number of education licenses members of the group held ranged from two to six. Everyone except the elementary special education team chairperson held a license for his or her current position. The elementary special education team chairperson had met the requirements of her licensure and applied for it, but was waiting for her licensure from the state. Everyone had taken special education law courses and everyone except the middle school team chairperson had taken special education classes.

All the interviewees were welcoming to the researcher. They answered all the questions asked of them to the best of their ability. They acknowledged when they were not 100% sure or did not know an answer. When this happened, many times the interviewee would advise the
researcher whom to ask to find the answer.

**How the system responds to special education mandates.** When special education mandates arrived in Town B from the state or federal level, Jeanne, the director of pupil personnel services, was in charge of passing on the information. This was usually done at team chairpeople meetings that were held twice a month. However, if a meeting was not scheduled the week a mandate was issued, Michelle, the middle school special education team chairperson, explained that the director of pupil personnel services “provides us with that information first in an email.” Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, said if an email version was not sent, sometimes the director sent “through inter-school mail…a copy of what mandate is coming down.” At the next meeting, the mandate and response would be explained further.

The team chairpeople then dispersed the district’s responses to the people in their respective buildings. As Jeanne, the director of pupil personnel services, explained, “primarily I communicate that through the team chairpeople who are the – kind of the gatekeepers at, if you will, at each of the buildings.” However, she stated, “if it's something really significant that I feel I need to address, I would – I would attend a faculty meeting that the principals hold at the buildings.” The director of pupil personnel services also kept building administrators in the loop. She explained that “then I also share it at the leadership meetings with the other administrators so that they're aware of what's expected, what we need to do in terms of the law.”

Professional development time was spent helping to ensure that the staff was following the new mandates. Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, stated that the meetings that dispersed the information to the staff at the school level “generally might be followed up with some type of professional development if necessary.” Rebecca, the elementary special education chairperson, explained that she thinks “the professional development piece
really helps with any updates that, to the regulations.”

**How the district engages in decision-making regarding special education policies, programs, and practices.** The new superintendent had really changed the way that Town B made decisions. The elementary special education chairperson explained that prior to this superintendent “it was primarily administration, kind of seeing what, where the need is.” Now communication was a key component in Town B’s decision-making process. Communication and discussion between district administration, school principals, teachers, aides, parents, and students played a role in how Town B now made their special education decisions. Rebecca, the elementary special education chairperson, used a popular special education term, “inclusion,” when describing the district’s new approach to decision-making. She said, “I think now there's a lot more inclusion, more committees being started to – to see what the need – need is, to include all parties, kind of work as a team.” The director of pupil personnel services discussed how the team chairpeople played an important role in the discussions, because “communicat[ion] with the team chairpeople around the pop- the type of population and the disabilities that we have” was critical for the decisions made.

The middle school special education team chairperson felt that at times the decision-making process started at the student level and moved up to the school district administration. She explained that sometimes “it starts with an IEP and the IEP team and then it goes to… building administration, then it goes to the larger administration and then it goes right up to superintendent.”

Discussions at IEP meetings also played a role in how Town B made decisions regarding special education for the district. In these meetings, parent and student input was gathered. In addition to those meetings, when making changes to programs and services, parent, community,
and student input was also sought. The high school special education team chairperson stated that the district sought “input from teachers, and then often they include parent and community input as well in a lot of the things that – that they do and students actually. They – they bring students in oftentimes as well.” The director of pupil personnel services explained that part of her job when making decisions was to “consider the parents and what they think is best.”

In addition to discussions, surveys were used to collect data regarding the district staff’s feelings about a particular issue. Rebecca, the elementary special education team chairperson, stated that, “our new superintendent and the director of curriculum, they're using Survey Monkey a lot…and they're collecting data and publishing the data to staff to show what staff are thinking, what their opinion is about programming.” In doing so, Rebecca felt that the administration was “sort of includ[ing] teachers and other support staff in on the conversations,” even if the teachers and support staff weren’t always at the table having the discussion directly.

The needs of the students, both those in special education and those receiving general education services, played a role in Town B’s decision-making process. The high school special education team chairperson explained that when making decisions, the district considers the overriding factor is [the students’] ability to make effective progress in the public school setting. That would be number one. And the second probably most common thing would be for a student who is impacting the ability of others to make progress.

The director of pupil personnel services stated that when making decisions determining what programs the district might require, it was “the needs of the…students [that] really dictated that we need.” The district also paid attention to trends of student needs. The middle school special education team chairperson explained that “if there is a cohort group or something on the radar screen or if there has been identified a need,” the district will use that information when
making decisions.

Administrators in Town B also took the budget into account when making special education decisions. As Jeanne, the director of pupil personnel services, said, “certainly we consider cost” when making decisions. The special education team chairperson at the middle school also felt “that there is a financial factor involved.” She stated that there is budgetary constraints and processes that need to happen for implementing new programming or getting new staff. Sometimes just a restructuring what you already have, that doesn’t require any new resources, it’s just getting creative with what’s here, other times it’s you need more of that.

Like Town A, Town B did not follow one particular method when making decisions, but instead implemented a variety of methods depending on the situation. When asked if the district utilized research methods mentioned in the study’s literature review, data driven/evidence based, problem solving process, or site-based management, the director of student services said, “I think we use a combination of all of that.” Michelle, the middle school special education team chairperson, also felt the district utilized a variety of methods and said

I think it’s probably a combination of all of that; sometimes it is about numbers and types of services that students need, but again, oftentimes we find we have an outlier or two that doesn’t fit in the box. So you have to kind of deal with that on an individual basis and ensure that you are providing students with what they need. So I think it’s a combination of things.

Rebecca, the elementary special education team chairperson, also felt the district used a variety of different methods, though she felt that “this year we've seen a lot more with our new superintendent [the use] of data, the data driving” the decisions. The high school and middle
school special education team chairpeople also mentioned that data played a role in the district's decision-making. Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, said, “We do take data. We look at that and that does drive some of our decisions.”

In addition to all those methods, the director of pupil personnel services explained that research also played a role in the district's decision-making. According to her, the district “also look[s] to research to see what, what the best, best programming is for that disability and try to work within that.”

Justifying the need for a program or service change or addition was also a critical consideration in Town B’s decision-making. The middle school special education team chairperson explained that

the need for it would need to be identified somewhere, whether that’s straight through data of straight numbers, types of disability, substantially separate or least restrictive for placement. And if there is a cohort group or something on the radar screen, or if there has been identified a need.

The director of pupil personnel services also felt that in recent years, “the team chairpeople come to me more often” with changes that need to be made as a result of student needs in the district. Laura also felt that the district’s decision-making was based on the “trends that we're seeing in the community.”

The high school special education team chairperson acknowledged that the district followed a problem solving approach where “it's more study group…where we'll be discussing a problem over time, coming up with recommendations, and then trying to implement them.”

Everyone interviewed felt that with the new superintendent, the school district was more proactive in its response to special education decision-making. In the past, Jeanne, the director
of pupil personnel services, explained that the district was

very much like we're in a constant reaction mode. We're always trying to solve the
problem in the minute or solve it quick, put a Band-Aid on it, and fix it and get us by this
one, but how are we gonna deal with the next one?

However, that has changed, as Jeanne explained,

with new adminis-, new superintendent, we're really working on trying to have, he keeps
saying, ‘People in the batter's box,’ or things waiting and, so that we have things in line,
and we're not always jumping and running around saying how we gonna fix this
problem?

Everyone expressed this shift in how the district responded. The elementary special
education team chairperson said that the district was “at this point proactive. Prior to this year, I
think it certainly was reactive” when making decisions relating to special education. The middle
school special education team chairperson explained that the district tried to be proactive by
“try[ing] to eliminate any surprises and we tried to set things up so the kids start on the right foot
…So I think it depends, there is so much information available that I think it’s less reactionary
and more preplanning.”

Even though the district has moved towards being more proactive with its special
education decisions, those interviewed acknowledged that there were times when the district had
to be reactive. The middle school special education team chairperson explained, “I think
sometimes things do take you by surprise, these are children, they change quickly.” The high
school special education team chairperson explained that

other times it may be that maybe something's happening or maybe we're, we're not
catching that a certain group of students are, are failing or whatever. And so then we have
to sort of be reactive and say, ‘What are we, this isn't working for these kids. What are we going to do about it?’

As a result of both of these situations, the district had to react and made necessary changes to meet those students’ needs.

**Town B’s special education programs and services.** Like that of Town A, Town B’s school district considered mandates and the decisions they had made regarding special education when they determined the variety of special education programs and services the district offered to meet the needs of the students in the town. At the elementary, middle, and high school levels, the district offered inclusion, co-teaching, substantially separate classes, and programs for students with autism, behavioral and emotional challenges, and those who presented with lower cognitive abilities. With multiple elementary schools in Town B, like Town A, not every elementary school offered each specialized program. As a result, the director of pupil personnel services explained that the students “transition between, they do get bussed over to the other side of town,” but this was done “primarily just because of space.”

At the elementary and middle schools, the district offered pull out services. There was a language-based learning classroom in the elementary schools. Town B’s middle school and high school offered social skills and life skill training. The middle school special education team chairperson explained that at the middle school there was a group of students that required social skills, so as a result “there is a social skills component to that program that’s taught as a class, not sort of as a related service but more so as part of the program.” Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, explained that at the high school the training focused more on life skills, since students were staying in district until they were 22 years old, and “so [the district] had to expand the program to make it appropriate for that vocational transition piece for
those kids who are going to be here with us longer.”

Town B offered a variety of special education services including speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological therapy, technology support, Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), counseling services, adaptive physical education, extended school year, and home service providers.

**Criteria for the identification of programs dependent on student needs.** When asked if Town B had written criteria for determining which particular program would best meet a student’s needs, administrators gave different answers. At the elementary level, the elementary special education team chairperson said that there were criteria in writing, but “it fluctuates a little bit depending on the student.” The director of pupil personnel services said, “We do have criteria that we developed two years ago to help us determine students who require substantially separate programs versus a co-taught classroom versus a general inclusion classroom.” However, she added that the district was in the process of needing to revisit that a little bit more and needing to further define our substantially separate programs. I think that it's not as clear-cut as it was, and so I think the lines have gotten blurred and maybe there are kids in those programs who really shouldn't be in those programs and we should be providing supports in other ways.

The special education team chairpeople for the middle school and high school said that there were criteria in writing at the elementary school level for determining where to place a student.

At the middle school level, the middle school and high school special education chairpeople said there were criteria in writing for determining which particular program would best meet a student’s needs. The elementary special education chair felt that the middle school
used some criteria when determining placement, but she also said that “they're working on that.” The director of pupil personnel services was not aware of the middle school having criteria in writing; however, she said “that's definitely something that we need to work on.”

When asked if the high school had written criteria for determining student placement in specific programs, everyone gave the same responses they had given when the question was asked regarding the middle school.

The middle school special education team chairperson said that when determining placement of a student, the school district utilized flowcharts and that they looked at each student as an individual. She explained that the district has
flowcharts that we use for the least restrictive process, so trying to figure out what criteria or generalized criteria of who would be in an inclusion class, who would need a co-taught class, who would need a substantially separate class, and for what reasons and to what degree. We have lots of kiddos with hybrid schedules. We try to individualize their strengths and weaknesses so that not everybody is put in one box.

**Challenges.** When asked what challenges Town B school district faced, the most common answer concerned the students placed in special education programs outside the school district. Rebecca explained, “If you look at other districts around us their numbers are a lot lower for out of district.” Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, said, “I would like to see even more of our out-of-district students be able to be successful within the public school setting.”

Budget constraints and how they affected the programs and services the district could provide were other areas that the interviewed administrators considered a challenge. Laura explained that “funding is always an issue and whether or not we have enough of what we need.”
Linked to the school district budget were two other challenges that Town B faced: the need for more space and more staff. The director of pupil personnel services explained that one elementary school was “the smallest school, and so it just doesn't have a lot of extra rooms.” As a result, students were bused to other schools in town in order to be in the program they needed. In Town B, some special education staff worked in multiple buildings. The middle school special education team chairperson felt that this “job sharing in between schools is a bit difficult at times, logistically for scheduling reasons. And also, I think people are pulled thin. They are in too many different places.” These special education staff members had to provide services for students and attend meetings for the students on their caseload. The students could suffer because if they wanted to see a specific staff member to work through an issue, that staff member was not always in the building to assist them. The high school special education team chairperson also wondered if the district had “enough paraprofessionals to provide that individualized support” and if “class sizes [were] too big.” Both of these challenges could only be solved if the district's budget allowed for the hiring of more staff.

The director of pupil personnel services felt a main challenge that Town B’s special education department faced was the fact that they did not have set criteria for the special education programs they offered. In addition, she felt that she needed to work “with the other administrators on insuring that we're maintaining a continuum of services” across all the programs offered at the different grade levels. Rebecca also felt that this was a problem. She mentioned that the programs were put in place more as a reaction to student needs instead of being well planned. She felt that “we can do a lot more with our programs, and I – I believe that there could be more planning to create these programs.”

The number of students referred to special education services was also a challenge. The
director of pupil personnel services said she would like to see Town B’s Response to
Intervention (RTI) services utilized more to determine “accommodations and modifications that
can be made for students before they even become eligible for special education.”

Laura, the high school special education team chairperson, expressed a concern that her
counterparts in the lower grades did not mention, but it was one they also did not encounter due
to the age of the student population with whom they worked. School can be a challenge for
students with special needs and Laura was concerned that they would decide to drop out. Even
though the district offered a variety of programs and services to help ensure the students were
able to access the curriculum, she was worried because for some students the “regular traditional
school day doesn't seem to be working, no matter what we do.”

**Town B’s perspective on the future of special education.** Town B’s administrators had
considered what the future of special education would look like in their district. Administrators
were pondering the move towards more inclusive programs. The middle school special
education team chairperson wondered how the district could be more inclusive with students
with special needs to determine “the best way for them to meet with success, access the
curriculum, be with…peers, be in a least restrictive environment.” The high school special
education team chairperson and director of pupil personnel services both wondered if making all
programs inclusive and training all teachers to meet the needs of all students was on the horizon
for special education in general and in Town B. The high school special education team
chairperson felt that “the move to inclusion has been overall a good one, and that sometimes I
wonder if, really, there needs to even be a separate, a…that special education should even be.
That maybe it should just be education.” The director of pupil personnel services felt that it was
important to have all educators on board with educating all students, and that “by making some
tweaks to our general ed programs, I think that we can look at fixing some of the things that need to be tweaked in our special ed programs.”

A major change that Jeanne, the director of pupil personnel services, said she would like to implement was building more quality programs so that the district could keep more students in district, instead of having to send them out of district. However, she was aware that this could not be done without a great deal of preparing and planning. She wanted to make “sure that we have the safety nets in place in district so that we can keep kids in our schools.” The director of pupil personnel services felt that bringing students back into Town B public schools was important because “kids need to be close to their peers. They need to be educated in their hometown. They need to be at – at their home schools.” Even though this was a change Jeanne would like to see in Town B’s future for the students currently serviced outside the district, she acknowledged that Town B’s special education programs “can't always meet everybody’s needs, but I think we need to do a better job at that…but I don't – I also don't want to start a program unless I know we can do it right.”

**Researcher’s take aways.** This researcher had three main take aways:

- The superintendent greatly affects the school district’s special education culture.
- Discussion was critical in decision-making, allowing for shared decision-making and input from the multiple stakeholders serving the district's special education students.
- Offices located in the school buildings allowed those in charge of decision-making regarding special education to directly observe the needs of the students and teachers in special education.

**The role of the superintendent.** In Town B, comments interviewees made affirmed the
importance of having a leader who is proactive in special education decision-making. The school district had recently appointed a new superintendent. Interviewees referenced the positive shift across the district with regard to the special education culture due to no longer being in a state of reacting and quick fixes with regard to the decision-making process.

**Shared decision-making and discussion.** Interviewees indicated that the special education administrators considered and/or involved teachers, parents, students and the community when making decisions relating to special education. In addition, student needs and parent concerns and views were considered by the district’s special education administration when making decisions regarding their special education population.

**Location, location, location.** The interviews were held in the schools where the special education administrators have their offices. The special education chairpeople have their offices in the school building of the respective grades they represent. The office for the director of student services was located in one of the elementary schools. As in Town A, this allowed the special education administrators responsible for making special education decisions to observe firsthand on a daily basis the students with special needs, the special education teachers, and the effects of their decisions.

**Town C Public Schools**

Town C is classified by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council as a developing suburb, since it was a maturing New England town (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008). Located roughly 80 miles west of Boston, Town C covers just over 28 square miles (“dhcd Town C,” 2013). There is a town center and the neighborhoods consist of houses on quarter-acre to half-acre acre lots (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008). The town’s population is growing, as are new subdivisions (“Massachusetts Community Types,” 2008).
Town C’s population as of 2010 was just over 21,000 (“2010 Demographic Profile – Town C,” 2010). Of the population, just over 4,500 were 19 years old or younger (“2010 Demographic Profile – Town C,” 2010). Racially, Town C consists of white (94%), African American (2.4%), some non-disclosed race (1.3%), Asian (.0.8%), American Indian and Alaska Native (0.1%), and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (less than 0.1%) (“2010 Demographic Profile – Town C,” 2010). The mean income for family households in Town C in 2011 was just over $73,000 (“Community Facts – Economic Town C,” 2012). Just over 24% of families in the town made less than $50,000 a year, five percent of which earned less than $25,000 (“Community Facts – Economic Town C,” 2012).

Town C’s public school district was a PK-12 school district with 2,874 students enrolled as of the 2012-2013 school year (“Town C Enrollment,” 2013). There are three elementary schools including one for preschool through first grade, one for second and third grade, and one for fourth and fifth grade. There is one middle school and one high school. In the 2011-2012 school year, the Town C Public School systems spent $12,588 per student (“2011-12 Per Pupil,” 2012).

In the 2010-2011 school year, 420 students enrolled in Town C Public Schools were on IEPs (“Town C – Special Education,” 2010). Of those, 99 were considered full inclusion (only removed from the general education classroom for a maximum of 20% of the day), 211 were partial inclusion (outside the general education classroom 21-60% of the day), 99 were substantially separate (inside the general education classroom 40% of the day), and 18 of the students on IEPs were in separate schools, residential facilities, or were homebound/hospital placement (“Town C – Special Education,” 2010). Town C has a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and the website for it is linked to the school district’s website. It still had last school year’s
meeting dates, but it stated when and where each monthly PAC meeting was held. Using that information, a person could determine when and where the meetings for this current school year would be held.

Four administrators who work with special education were contacted to be part of this study. Of those, three said yes. After giving permission for his district to participate in the study, the superintendent of schools never replied to the email inquiring if he would be interviewed as part of the study. Administrators interviewed include the director of student support services and the school district’s two special education supervisors. Those administrators interviewed had worked in Town C in their current positions between 16 months and 14 years. The secondary level special education supervisor had worked in Town C for 16 months and had held the same position in another school district for 18 months. The director of student support services had held other positions in other towns and in Town C, but had not held the same position in any other town. The elementary special education supervisor had worked in Town C in her current position for 14 years and had not held any other jobs in Town C, but had held other job positions in other school districts. All three administrators held masters degrees, with the elementary special education supervisor holding two. The director of student services had her CAGS, and the secondary special education supervisor was in the process of finishing her thesis for her doctorate when she was interviewed. Combined, the three interviewees held ten licenses and all were licensed for the job they currently held. All had worked directly with students with special needs and had taken special education courses and special education law courses.

All the interviewees were welcoming to the researcher. They answered all the questions asked of them to the best of their ability. They acknowledged when they were not 100% sure or
did not know an answer. When this happened, many times the interviewee would advise the researcher whom to ask to find the answer.

**How the system responds to special education mandates.** The director of student services, Eva, explained that they were “always checking what we're doing. We – we're really always trying here to be in compliance with – with – with what we're supposed to be doing with the mandates.” When a new mandate was set forth, the superintendent was the first to receive it, and then forwarded it to the director of student services. She then “review[ed] them with my supervisors. We hold meetings with our special ed staff every other month. If there's anything new that they need to know, we inform them either through email or through our meeting process.” Sharon, the secondary special education supervisor, reiterated what Eva said when she explained that

we go through a process where Eva, our director, will, she's very good at, with communicating. Usually they'll be, she'll inform the staff on what the new procedures and process – the process and procedures for the – for the mandate.

The elementary special education supervisor also explained that “our director will send out [an] email with the attached notice from the state” and that those mandates would be reviewed in the “staff meetings every other month with the special ed department.”

The secondary special education supervisor also acknowledged that with regard to special education mandates, it was not only the director of student services who was responsible for ensuring those mandates were being met. She said

the principals, because they're ultimately liable for their – for – they're the lead decision makers for their buildings. So usually if those types of state mandates are coming down the pike, they're also responsible for implementing that in their building for all students
so whether it's a 504 or IEP, special needs student.

**How the district engages in decision-making regarding special education policies, programs, and practices.** In Town C, student needs were a critical component in the decision-making process, as were the discussions generated regarding student needs. Sharon, the secondary special education supervisor, explained, “we look at what the needs of the students are” and when making decisions there were “round-table discussion around how we would implement this, and looking at staffing and budgeting and the needs of the students.” The elementary special education supervisor mentioned that this could be a bottom-up process initiated by the teachers and brought to the director of student service’s attention. She explained we have supervisors meetings every Friday. So, it's a director, myself, and the other supervisor. And so we look at what we see out in the district and what we hear from the teachers. So, we go by that, and we bring it to our director's attention, and then we look at what is it that students need.

Even though Eva was the director and was in charge of making the decisions that were brought to the superintendent and the school committee, she explained that I have the title ‘director,’ but I don't ever make any decisions without talking to [the supervisors]. And we do a lot of problem solving together…I had conversations with many people, especially my supervisors and the building principals…Obviously, I have the final say, but it's after a lot of talking and – and processing and really trying to figure out what is the best way to go.

Eva gave an example of how the district’s paying attention to student needs led to changes in Town C’s special education programs and services. Their behavior program now had full-time social workers as a result of the student need. She explained that
we saw the need in regards to making our behavioral programs more therapeutic and truly be therapeutic all day long. We needed to have those licensed clinical social workers there all day to do that ther- therapeutic component with – with the kids, as needed, not just, ‘Oh, you're having, you're having a really bad day today, and you're in crisis. We got to wait until next week, until the therapist comes in.’

Having part-time social workers had not been working for the program. This change to add new social workers allowed Town C to meet the students’ needs while keeping the students in district. The director of student services believed that without this change, the district “would've ended up with a lot of kids out of district this year.”

Administrators in Town C also paid attention to trends, both in their district and in the special education community. Nikki, the elementary special education supervisor, discussed how the school district “look[ed] at the trends of what's happening. Especially, transitions is a big issue.” Eva and Nikki stated that responding to mandates from the state and federal levels also played a role in the district’s decision-making.

Everyone interviewed felt that the district utilized a variety of methods when making decisions. The elementary special education supervisor explained that Eva, our director, is a real problem solver; and so she wants to hear what the problems are and work it out and figure out what we can do to solve it. She does ask us to bring data. The numbers, the stats…And then the building principals…at the elementary level, the school adjustment counselors bring to me their data.

In addition, the elementary special education supervisor also stated that the district did not just apply the same solution each time they made a decision, even if it was similar to a problem they had previously faced, and that they evaluated the decisions they made. She
explained that

it's not like, Oh, this is how we did it last time. Let's do it again. It's kind of like, here's
the problem. Let's look at how we can solve it. Let's go back and see what data we have
and then come back and look at it again.

The director of student services discussed how the district utilized data from within the
district when they made the decision to create an ABA lab. She explained

we had the data that said – we had the information that said, Look it. We've got these kids
coming into the district. This is what the reports are saying that they need. Well, we don't
have anything like this.

Only two of the people interviewed were asked whether they felt that Town C was
reactive or proactive in its decision-making. The director of student services was not asked,
though both of the special education supervisors said that the director was responsible for the
district being more proactive in decision-making and programs and services offered. The
elementary special education supervisor, Nikki, explained that, “ideally, we'd like to be
proactive; and I think, the – the changes that my director currently has made, we've been able to
be a little more proactive.” She referenced the changes the district had made with regard to the
transition of students from high school when they reach 22 years old as a specific example of
how the district had been proactive. However, Nikki did acknowledge “a lot of our decisions are
reactive to a situation” and “its reaction to this is not working. We need to solve it.”

**Town C’s special education programs and services.** Like Town A and Town B, the
special education programs and services that Town C offered were a result of the district meeting
the needs of the students while also meeting the state and federal mandates. Many of the
programs and services were offered throughout the K-12 grades. Inclusion, pull out,
cognitive/severe needs program, behavior program, autism program, language disability program, and a teacher for the hearing impaired were all offered at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. At the elementary and middle school, there was a teacher for the visually impaired and social skills program. There was currently not a need for a teacher for the visually impaired at the high school. At the middle school and high school the autism support was inclusive, while at the elementary level it was substantially separate. A life skills program was offered at the high school level. In addition, the district offered speech and language services, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychologists, counseling, technology, and adaptive physical therapy.

Criteria for the identification of programs dependent on student needs. When asked if there were written criteria for placing a student in a specific program, the administrators interviewed had different responses. The director of student services explained that we do have criteria, but we're, that's something that we're working on right now, is really getting something in writing describing all the programs. I don't really have, in writing, set criteria. We do have some for some of the programs, but not for every single program. The elementary special education supervisor’s response was similar to that of the director of student services. She said that at the elementary grades there is, and there isn't. We look at criteria, but every student's a[n] individual. So, we do have for a behavior student that, we do an FBA, Functional Behavioral Assessment. We ha- pull in our service team to get information before we just put a student in there. But not to say that you have a student who we have had students who've gone right from [a] regular ed program to a behavioral program due to a severity of a behavior that they had. So, although there's criteria, it's open to individual needs.
The elementary special education supervisor also explained that at the middle and high school that there was not “something that's set, that we have a checklist or something that says [a student] has to have all this.”

At the elementary, middle, and high school levels, Sharon, the secondary special education supervisor, said the district utilizes written criteria for determining placement. She acknowledged that the elementary grades were not her area of expertise, but said that the specific programs the district offered did have criteria in writing, as did the programs at the middle and high school.

**Challenges.** Similar to Town A and Town B, Town C faced challenges with regard to special education. For example, Town C’s school district was also spatially challenged. In Town C, some of the teachers at the elementary level shared rooms due to lack of space. Town C also shared Town A’s concern about the MCAS regarding their special education population. The director of student services explained that while this population was meeting requirements, it was in the at-risk category. She would “like to get that at-risk part off of the little category that I’ve fallen under. Out of the five categories, we’re at category two. I’d love to be a category one.” She was referring to the state of Massachusetts categorizing schools and districts on a five level scale, where one is the best.

Another area in which the director of student services felt Town C needed to improve was its inclusion model. She felt that the challenge she faced with moving towards a true inclusion model was a result of teacher mindsets. As she explained, it was a division in the past, and it's taken us really three years to kind of break down those walls to say, ‘They’re our kids. It's not your kid and my kid. They’re our kids and we need to work together as a team to do what's best for all the kids.’
The secondary special education supervisor brought up another challenge that made the move to improve the district’s inclusion model harder. She felt that the district did not provide enough collaboration between the special education and general education teachers. She said that there was a need for “more collaboration, more common planning time for special education teachers and general education teachers to be working together for planning.”

The current state of the district’s RTI program was a concern that the secondary special education supervisor shared. Her concerns were similar to those expressed in Town B; she, too, would like to see them “beefed up a lot before we hit the special education piece.”

The elementary special education supervisor brought up that while the district had a great deal of technology, continuing to grow the variety of technology and technology usage in the schools was a challenge. She also felt that the district was pushing to get the students more involved in the community, but the challenge was “utilizing some monies for that.”

Everyone interviewed offered suggestions for how to fix some of Town C’s current challenges, some of which were in the process of being implemented. The director of student services and the secondary special education supervisor felt that more professional development was critical to solve the MCAS and inclusion challenges. The director of student services acknowledged that math was the area of concern regarding the MCAS. To help improve scores in this area, the district had offered “some math PD” and “sending people out to workshops.” The secondary special education supervisor felt that “more professional development for special ed and general ed teacher[s]” in addition to what had already been implemented by the director of student services would help with improving the inclusion model. The elementary special education supervisor felt that one way to combat the challenges would be to hire more special education teachers and paraprofessionals.
Town C’s perspective on the future of special education. Town C’s special education administrators had given much thought to what the future of special education would look like in their district. Eva, the director of student services, said that although what the town currently had was already an improvement, she would like to see more inclusion. As she explained, inclusion wasn’t always part of the elementary programming here in Town C. When I first got here, at the elementary level, I don’t think there were any inclusion programs at all. It was all pull out and sent to separate classrooms.

The elementary special education supervisor also felt that inclusion was the future of Town C’s special education. The director of student services said she would like to see Town C’s inclusion move more towards a co-teaching model. Her hope for the future was for the general education teacher to see that “it’s not [that] the special ed teacher is the paraprofessional in your classroom. She’s your equal, or he’s your equal. You should be working together, planning together, correcting papers together, teaching together.”

Nikki, the elementary special education supervisor, would like to see the social pragmatic program expanded in the future. She felt that “the social skills piece, the pra- social pragmatics and cognitive thinking is another big area that we want to keep pushing forward.”

New school buildings were, hopefully, in Town C’s future. Nikki explained that the district and town was “looking to possibly create one, big elementary school or two new ones.” If new elementary school(s) were built, she hoped that the special education offices could be moved into “one of the buildings, just so we can be more visible, be more in touch with the staff and the students.”

Nikki felt that the district had made strides towards improving the transition for the lower-functioning cognitive students, but that Town C now needed to start looking at transition
for all students and not waiting until high school to do that. She explained that

we're starting to look at, all right, what about just the typical special ed student who's just
an average kid that needs some support at the el- at the high school level but then also at
the middle school level, those kiddos.

Nikki also believed that the district should work more with getting the students out in the
community. She would like to work with the “Boys and Girls Club that's in a – in walking
distance to an elementary school and to the middle school and almost the high school. Utilizing
that for [the] kiddos, like, they have a swimming pool. They have a rock wall over there.”

However, she acknowledged that introducing the real world component was a challenge because
“there's just not enough time in the day.”

When looking at the future and keeping in mind how mandates and policy change
regarding special education, Nikki felt that Town C should look into creating “our own in-house – a[n] in-house suspension program, 'cause I know that we're not going to be able to suspend kids soon.”

When asked about the future of special education in Town C, the secondary special
education supervisor discussed how the budget played a role in the decisions being made about
what special education would look like.

**Researcher’s take aways.** This researcher had three main take aways:

- One person can bring about change, especially when that person is in a position of
  power.

- Discussion was critical in decision-making, allowing for input from the special
  education administrators serving the district's special education students.

- Even a small district can offer a great deal of services.
One person can bring change. When the director of student services started three years ago, she implemented changes in how the district serviced their special education population. Inclusion, which is considered by many in education to be best practice, was not part of Town C’s special education services. She acknowledged that this change was a challenge that the district faced, since the previous school culture was one of division between general education students and students with special needs. That divide was gone; however, town C was still working to improve its inclusion model to one where the special educator and the general educator are viewed as co-teachers in the classroom.

Shared decision-making and discussion. While the director of student services in Town C was the person responsible for making special education decisions, she relied on her special education supervisors to participate in the process. They worked together to problem solve, and it was not until “after a lot of talking and – and processing and really trying to figure out what is the best way to go” that Eva was able to make the final decision.

Lots of services. Town C is the least affluent of the three towns, yet it offered a great deal of in-district services that enabled the district to educate special education students who might otherwise have been placed out of district. After it became apparent that the social, emotional, and behavior program’s therapeutic component was not enough to meet the needs of the students, three licensed clinicians (social workers) were hired. As a result, the district saw a decrease in out-of-district referrals. The district created an ABA lab at the preschool, so that they could meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum in the town’s preschool. In addition, the district had a teacher for the hearing impaired and a teacher for the visually impaired. The district is adding services to meet the needs of its special education population, so
that students can be educated in their community rather than being placed in a school outside of the district.

**Prominent Themes across the Three Participating Districts**

Reading the interviews multiple times, the researcher identified several themes that appeared in the responses of district staff across the three districts. Key concepts in the literature review and contingency theory helped in the discovery of these themes.

These themes included:

- Administration shared in the decision-making
- There was an attempt to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students
- The role of budget in decision-making
- A district’s response is dependent on available resources at the school

**Administration shared in the decision-making.** Administrators in each of the three school districts discussed the importance of communication and discussion when making decisions related to special education. The administrators at the director’s level each held the final decision-making power as to what would be brought to the superintendent and school committee. However, each of them did not make the decisions alone.

While Town A’s director was not interviewed, those interviewed discussed how she sought out the input from other higher administration staff and the special education administrators that worked under her. The out-of-district coordinator explained that many times, discussion started with the director in the special education department meetings and was led by the special education department heads since they “know the needs of the kids the most.” According to the out-of-district coordinator, the department heads’ information came from the special education “teachers who meet with the department heads.” From there, the director of
student services “has discussions with the superintendent and with the business manager and we all sort of weigh in with regard to finding out the best way to do it and the most financially sound way to do it.”

When making decisions regarding special education in Town B, district administration, school principals, teachers, aides, parents, and students would frequently be involved in the process. The high school special education team chairperson felt the school district’s decision-making process was a “pretty democratic process…where it could involve administrators, input from teachers, and then often they include parent and community input…They – they bring students in oftentimes as well.” Committees were formed and surveys were administered to learn the feelings of people in the district. The elementary special education team chairperson explained that “more committees [were] being started to – to see what the need – need is, to include all parties, kind of work as a team” and that the “new superintendent and the director of curriculum, they're using Survey Monkey a lot…and they're collecting data and publishing the data to staff to show what staff are thinking, what their opinion is about programming.” The director of pupil personnel services in Town B discussed the importance of feedback and information from her team chairpeople when making decisions, because they worked directly with the teachers who serviced “the type of population and the disabilities that we [the district] have.”

Eva, the director of student support services in Town C, explained that she has “the title ‘director,’ but I don't ever make any decisions without talking to [the supervisors].” Her secondary special education supervisor reiterated this when she said that there was a “round-table discussion around how we would implement this, and looking at staffing and budgeting and the needs of the students.” Eva did not solely rely on input from her supervisors; she also sought
out building principals for their views on matters. With regard to making special education decisions in Town C, Eva explained that “obviously, I have the final say, but it's after a lot of talking and – and processing and really trying to figure out what is the best way to go.”

While each school district employed shared decision-making, the people involved and the process varied. What was clear from the analysis of the interviews was that the school district top administrators followed contingency theory, since they believed that there were multiple ways for the district to make decisions and that it needed to take into account the environment and contingency factors when making decision (Powers, 2000).

**Attempt to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students.** The three school districts all tried to be proactive in their decision-making and to consider the needs of their special education population when making decisions related to the programs and services they provided.

In Town A, all five administrators interviewed referred to student needs as a key component in the district’s consideration of programs and services. The out-of-district coordinator explained that discussions related to special education changes in the district involved the special education team chairpeople because they “know the needs of the kids the most,” and because the teachers who worked directly with the students expressed their concerns over student needs to their team chairpeople. She explained that teachers reached out to her and her counterparts and said, “this is what we need. This is what’s not working. This is what I think might work.”

Town A also looked at trends in their special education population to help determine student needs. The elementary special education department head explained, “that there are trends that inform, help us think about what we need.” These trends allowed Town A
administrators to be proactive in determining the programs and services they decided to offer. Having a small special education population and a staff that usually remained in the district for their whole education career also helped Town A to be proactive. The superintendent referred to this as a luxury, because the district was “able to look ahead several years, in some cases, to make sure those kids are going to get services.” Since students tend to remain in Town A their whole K-12 experience, the trends the district saw in the younger grades meant that similar services and programs would be required as the students progressed through the grades. The acting assistant superintendent reiterated this when he said that they “try to be proactive. We try to anticipate the needs based on where our students are and adjust accordingly.”

The needs of all the students in Town B’s school district, for example, were considered when making decisions. The high school special education team chairperson stated that the overriding factor is [the students’] ability to make effective progress in the public school setting. That would be number one. And the second probably most common thing would be for a student who is impacting the ability of others to make progress.

The director of pupil personnel services explained that the “the needs of the…students really dictated” what the district needed with regard to the programs and services provided. Michelle, the middle school special education team chairperson, also explained that when the district made decisions, they considered the “numbers and types of services that students need… and ensure that you are providing students with what they need.”

Like administrators in Town A, those in Town B paid attention to the trends they saw with regard to student needs. This information was used, as Michelle explained, when making decisions. The district looked at “if there is a cohort group or something on the radar screen or if there has been identified a need.”
Town B’s administrators acknowledged that in the past, the district had been more reactive in its special education decision-making, but with the new superintendent a shift was made to be more proactive. The director of pupil personnel services explained that with new administrators, we're really working on trying to have, he keeps saying, ‘People in the batter's box,’ or things waiting and, so that we have things in line, and we're not always jumping and running around saying how we gonna fix this problem?

The middle school special education team chairperson agreed that the district tried “to eliminate any surprises and we tried to set things up so the kids start on the right foot.” She explained that they were able to do that because “there is so much information available” with regard to the students and their needs.

As in Town A, each person interviewed in Town C discussed how student needs played a critical role in the district’s decision-making process. When she was asked how the district went about determining which special education programs and services to offer, the secondary special education supervisor stated, “To my knowledge, I believe that we look at what the needs of the students are.” She also said that the district considered “what's best for the kid.” The elementary special education supervisor explained that in the weekly supervisor meetings with the director, they discussed “what we see out in the district and what we hear from the teachers…we look at what is it that students need.” The director of student support services provided an example of the district’s consideration of student needs in making decisions regarding special education programs and services. She explained that “we saw the need in regards to making our behavioral programs more therapeutic and truly be therapeutic all day long,” so that when a student had a
“really bad day today…[or was] in crisis” they would not have to “wait until next week, until the therapist comes in.”

The administrators in Town C were proactive in their decision-making related to the special education services and programs they provided. Both special education supervisors said that the director was responsible for the district being more proactive. The elementary special education supervisor explained that “ideally, we'd [the district] like to be proactive; and I think [with] the changes that my director currently has made, we've been able to be a little more proactive.” The secondary special education supervisor stated that the district was premeditated. I mean, the director and the other supervisor, who's been here for a very long time, there's no – we can't afford to jump the gun on our decision-making process.

So I would say that it's premeditated based on the needs of our kids.

By being proactive in their decision-making and keeping the students’ needs in mind when making decisions, all three of these school districts ensured that the students who receive special education had appropriate programs and services.

**The role of budget in decision-making.** All three school districts considered the budget when deciding what to implement for their special education populations. Even in an affluent town like Town A, the budget was a factor when making decisions. The out-of-district coordinator explained that “budgets nowadays are tight, even in a community such as Town A. We really are responsible financially for putting out a good product and making sure that the product we put out continues to meet the needs of the kids.” The acting assistant superintendent considered one of the district’s biggest challenges to be providing the best services while being fiscally responsible. He explained that “there's constant pressure between wanting to support the students as best as you can with the financial realities of what that entails.” The superintendent
in Town A noted that the budget was a concern, even though their special education department was not “missing anything right now. It's just that we [would] always like to do more and provide the gold standard at all times.” The out-of-district coordinator mentioned one of the reasons funding was a challenge was due to unfunded mandates that were imposed from the state and federal government. She explained the challenge was “these unfunded mandates that they keep handing us, and even though Town A is in a better place financially, we’re still not. I mean, we still have budget concerns.”

In Town B, the director of pupil personnel services acknowledged that when making decisions they “certainly…consider[ed] cost.” The district’s middle school special education team chairperson felt “that there [was] a financial factor involved” when decisions were made because “there [were] budgetary constraints.” The high school special education team chairperson explained that “funding is always an issue and whether or not we have enough of what we need.”

The secondary special education supervisor explained that when making decisions, Town C’s higher administrators “look[ed] at staffing and budgeting.” She explained that “now we're in budget, they're beginning the budget process. So we're looking at projections for next year. So futuristically we look at what's coming down and for about for next year” and that the budget played a role in the decisions being made.

**Funding played a critical role in determining what a district can and cannot implement and this can present a challenge.** In Town A, Town B, and Town C, the administrators interviewed discussed the need for more space and more staffing. The lack of funding was preventing these needs from being met. The need for more space affected special education program space in Town A, but it was not just a special education issue, since the whole middle
school was “bursting at the seams” according to the middle school special education department head. The wish for more special education staff was expressed twice by the superintendent in Town A during his interview. He said that he felt that the district never had “enough staff to actually provide our dream level of service.” He acknowledged that the district had “some teachers with caseloads that are too high and in a perfect world and they're stretched thin and that…that has ramifications.”

In Town B, the smallest elementary school “doesn't have a lot of extra rooms,” and so students were bussed to another schools in the town in order to be in the program they needed. The middle school and high school special education team chairpeople expressed the need for more special education staff. The middle school special education team chairperson explained that some staff participated in “job sharing in between schools.” As a result, she felt that it could be “a bit difficult at times, logistically for scheduling reasons. And also, I think people are pulled thin. They are in too many different places.” The high school special education team chairperson questioned whether the district had “enough paraprofessionals to provide that individualized support.” She also wondered if “class sizes [were] too big.” Hiring more staff to teach would solve this problem.

The elementary special education supervisor expressed the need for more space in Town C. She explained that “space is an issue at – at the elementary level in a couple of our buildings, so we have teachers sharing rooms.” She also felt that Town C was “always at, at least in special ed, we're always try – looking to increase staff, whether it's paraprofessionals or s- or teaching staff.”

A district’s response is dependent on available resources at the school. At each grade level, each town offered a variety of programs and services to meet the needs of the students with
special needs. The responses varied from town to town due to the availability of financial, staffing, and structural resources.

**Programs.** All the school districts offered the following special education programs throughout their K-12 school system: inclusion, substantially separate, cognitively delayed, autism, and behavioral and emotional.

Town A and Town C provided pull out services in K-12 grades. Town B provided pull out services in K-8 grades. Town A and Town B had language learning disability programs for students up until the ninth grade; Town C had it in all grades throughout the K-12 system. Town A and Town B had co-teaching in the elementary grades, and Town B also offered it at the middle and high school grades. Town C offered social skills courses at the elementary and middle school, and Town A and Town B offered it at the middle school. Town C had a teacher of the visually impaired for K-8 and a teacher of the hearing impaired for K-12.

At the high school level in all of the towns, there was a program that focused on life skills and/or transition. In Town A, there was a life skills program and as the out-of-district coordinator explained, the district was in the process of “building a transitions program for the 18- to 22-year-olds.” The high school special education team chairperson explained that Town B had “expand[ed] the program to make it appropriate for that vocational transition piece for those kids who are going to be here with us longer.” In Town C, a life skills program was offered.

In Town A, Town B, and Town C the specialized programs were individualized to meet the needs of the students. The middle school special education department head from Town A explained that due to this individualization, the program structure varied for each child. She went on to explain that as a result, the program could be substantially separate if the student
required it to be, “but [the programs] also can be home bases and the majority of our kids are out in general ed for at least some part of the day.”

Not all programs were offered at every elementary school in Town A, Town B, and Town C. The superintendent in Town A explained that as a result, the district “transport[ed] kids in district to our in-district programs.” The reason he gave for not offering each program at each elementary school was that “it's just really a way to create economies on scale and efficiencies…and service.” In Town B, director of pupil personnel services explained that students were “bussed over to the other side of town,” but that it was done “primarily just because of space.” The elementary special education supervisor explained that in Town C, programs were “offer[ed]…at all the levels, but it's not in all the buildings, necessarily.”

*Services and supports.* Town A, Town B, and Town C offered speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological therapy, and counseling services. Town A and Town B offered Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and technology support. Town B and Town C offered adaptive physical therapy. In addition, Town A offered orientation mobility therapy, music therapy, vision support, and had a van for community-based instruction. In Town B, the school district offered extended school year and home service providers.

**Differences across the Districts**

When reading and reviewing the interviews, in addition to finding themes that were common across all of the school districts, differences were also noted. These differences include:

- The challenge of funding
- The roles of parents in programs
- The role of the student
The divide between special education and general education

These differences are discussed below.

**Funding is a challenge.** All three districts discussed the role funding played in the decision-making process. Budgets play a big role in public schools, and special education programs and services often accounts for a large portion of a district’s budget. However, only interviewees in Town A and Town B directly referenced the budget as a challenge. Town C mentioned challenges that could be linked to the budget, like the need for a new building, but did not mention budget directly.

In Town A, the superintendent, the acting assistant superintendent, and the out-of-district coordinator all stated that the budget was a challenge the district faced with regard to special education. The superintendent actually said that in regard to providing a high quality of special education services and programs, the budget was the district’s “greatest challenge.” As he said, special education students have diverse needs. And meeting those needs within the context of limited budget can be challenging…There's constant pressure between wanting to support the students as best as you can with the financial realities of what that entails.

So striking that balance probably is our greatest challenge.

The issues of funding were mentioned by both Town B’s middle school and high school special education team chairpeople. The high school special education team explained that “funding is always an issue, and whether or not we have enough of what we need.” And the middle school special education team stated, “there is budgetary constraints.”

**The role of the parent in programs.** Parents were discussed by administrators in all of the school districts, but how parents played a role in the special education process differed among the districts. In Town A and Town B, the parents played a role in the district’s creation
of special education programs. Interviewees in both towns discussed how the parents were involved in the district’s decision-making process involving the district’s programs.

In Town A, the elementary special education department head explained that the district utilized parent groups as sounding boards to collect their thoughts on new program ideas. She stated that once school staff had been involved by administration in the process of the formation of the program, the district would “then oftentimes [involve] the parents. You have parent groups and give them the opportunity to ask question and give feedback.” The out-of-district coordinator also mentioned that parents reviewed the programs they had implemented. She explained that administration, special education administration, and staff working in the program “meet after the programs are here but then we get to the point where we invite, involve parents.”

In Town B, the high school special education team chairperson discussed that parents became part of the decision-making process with new programs after the district had already developed an idea for the program. She said that administrators and school staff were involved with collecting the information regarding student needs and services and that they worked together to figure out what this might look like and how we would meet the needs…And then eventually we got to a point of putting like a PowerPoint type presentation together. And then we brought it to the parents and had those discussions.

In Town C, parents did not have any part of the creation of new programs or the evaluation of the programs after they have been formed. After the program had been established and was ready to be implemented, parents were made aware of it. The elementary special education supervisor explained that “unfortunately, the last people to know is usually the parents.” She went on to explain that the director of student services did a good job of informing
parents of changes that would occur. She stated, “Eva's been really good about sending letters home to parents letting them know, ‘This has been a change. This will be the upcoming changes that will take place after the holiday,’ or whenever it may be.”

**The role of the student.** At the age of fourteen, special education students become active members of team meetings and the creation of their Individual Education Plan. While special education is student-driven and -focused, only Town B mentioned the role of the student in the decision-making process. The high school special education team chairperson mentioned that students were involved in determining the creation of new programs. She explained that she thought the district followed “a pretty democratic process” since the people involved in the creation of programs included “administrators’ input from teachers, and then often they include parent and community input as well in a lot of the things that – that they do. And students actually. They – they bring students in often.”

**The divide between general education and special education.** In both Town C and Town B, the directors interviewed discussed the divide between the general education and special education staff and the effect it had on students’ education. In Town C, the director of student support services mentioned how in the past three years since she started working there, the district had made improvements in its inclusion model. She said,

> it's taken us really three years to kind of break down those walls to say, ‘They’re our kids. It's not your kid and my kid. They’re our kids and we need to work together as a team to do what's best for all the kids.’

Here she referenced how general education teachers often refer to special education students as the special educators’ students; they are considered to be the responsibility of the special educator more so than of the general education teachers.
When asked about any future plans, the director of pupil personnel services in Town B mentioned that the district was looking into “training all of our staff, or a good number of our staff in Wilson because that's been kind of an area where we [the district] struggle.” Wilson is “a highly structured remedial program that directly teaches the structure of the language to students and adults who have been unable to learn with other teaching strategies, or who may require multisensory language instruction” (“WILSON Reading System,” 2010, par. 1). She explained that the district was doing this “in order – as a way of – if we can get people on board with that we educate all students, general ed and special ed by making some tweaks to our general ed programs.”

Special education administrators who were interviewed in Town A did not mention the divide between special education and general education.

**Summary of Findings**

While each of the three school districts differed in town size, town population, town economic diversity, amount spent per student per year, and special education population size, all three school districts shared similarities in how they dealt with special education. Four themes that were identified include: shared decision-making, an attempt to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students, budget restrictions, and district response dependent on available resources at the school level. The districts did not utilize a top-down approach where the directors and superintendents dictated what programs and services the district would implement, but instead used shared decision-making. They all felt it was important to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students and kept that in the forefront of their minds, along with the budget, when making special education decisions and determining which programs and services to implement in order to meet the needs of their diverse special education population.
The four differences identified were whether funding is a challenge, the role of parents in programs, the role of the student, and the divide between special education and general education. Differences were noted in the special education administrators’ answers to questions related to challenges the district faced. Only interviewees in Town A and Town B cited funding and the budget as a challenge. The roles of parents and students in the decision-making process also differed among the towns. Town A and Town B involved parents in the creation of new special education programs prior to implementation, or used them to evaluate the programs. Town B was the only town that included student input in the creation of programs. In Town B and Town C, it was acknowledged that a divide existed between special education and general education staff.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Each school district is required to follow the same guidelines, protocols, and procedures to meet state and federal mandates; however, how they do this can vary. School districts implement special education procedures, programs, and practices as they see best meets the needs of their special education population while meeting the guidelines set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (Chaikind et al., 1993; “Moving to a new location,” 2010). This federal law means that school districts have to address top-down legislation with regard to special education requirements. Often, these school districts in turn then utilize this same top-down approach, since it is the school district administration that determines which programs and services the district offers (Owens, 1998). Staff members who work directly with students are not typically part of the decision-making process, or even aware of how the decision came to be, but are required to implement the decisions made by
administration. Researchers have noted that when staff members are not involved in or made aware of the decision-making process, they can feel disenfranchised and not as willing to adopt the change being implemented (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Meyer, 2009; Zoller, Ramanathan, & Yu 1999).

IDEIA informs school districts what is required, but does not spell out what the district must set up or implement. As long as a school district meets the government special education mandates, each district is allowed to make its own decisions regarding how it sets up its special education programs and services (Chaikind et al., 1993; “Moving to a new location,” 2010). As a result, there is little continuity across school districts within each state. For example, IDEIA requires that school districts evaluate students for a disability if they were referred for special education or if three years have passed since their last evaluation. The evaluation is done to “yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally” (“Changes in Initial,” 2006, p. 2). While it is up to the school district’s discretion which assessments to use, the districts can differ in the diagnosis process (Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991; LDA Public Policy/Advocacy Committee, 2010; Lester & Kelman, 1997; MacMillan et al., 1998; MacMillan & Siperstein, 2001; Mercer et al., 1985; Scull & Winkler, 2011; “What Happens,” 2013), and the criteria of the classification of students’ disabilities (Bienenstock & Vernon, 1994; Danielson & Bellamy, 1989; Frankenberger & Fronzaglio, 1991; MacMillan et al., 1998; Mercer et al, 1985; Mercer et al., 1996; Scull & Winkler, 2011; Singer et al., 1989). One district or state might qualify a student with a certain disability, but that student might not qualify in another district or state or might qualify under a different disability. A student’s disability classification is important, because it becomes the student’s label. It is something a district considers when determining a student’s special
education placement and it affects the student’s school educational and social experience (Mercer et al., 1996; Singer et al., 1989). If the student moves to a new town, their disability could mean different programs and services as provided by the new district.

Each school district is allowed to determine which programs and services to offer to its special education population. IDEIA just requires that it be the least restrictive environment (LRE) and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (“Sec. 300.114,” 2006, par. 4).

As a result, the programs and services can differ district to district.

**Review of Methodology**

The following research question was used to guide the study:

In the context of current expectations as set forth by federal legislation for providing special education students with appropriate instructional support, how do suburban school districts make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding district policies, services, programs, strategies, and use of resources to meet the needs of their special education students?

In this qualitative study, interviews with administrators in charge of special education in three medium-sized, suburban public school districts in southeastern Massachusetts were conducted to answer this question. The interviewees ranged from a superintendent to administrators who supervised special education and the related staff at the elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. Interviews are an important source of information gathering in a
qualitative study, since the interviewee is able to provide information into these situations (Yin, 2009). The interview transcripts were then reviewed to identify themes. Vivid descriptions, discussions per the researcher’s bias, and peer debriefing were used to ensure the validity of the data.

Based on the data collected and analyzed, this chapter comprises the following seven sections: discussion of major findings, discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks, discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review, limitations, significance of the study, future studies, and next steps.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The interviewees discussed how their school district responded to state and federal mandates and made decisions related to special education, the programs and services the district offered, the challenges they felt the district faced, and the future of special education in their district. Careful analysis of the interview transcripts led to the identification of the following themes:

- Administration shared in the decision-making
- Attempted to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students
- The role of budget in decision-making
- A district’s response is dependent on available resources at the school

Each of these themes is discussed below.

**Administration shared in the decision-making.** In each of the three school districts, those interviewed mentioned that the decision-making process was not undertaken by one individual, but instead involved various members of the district. Special education administrators across grade levels attended meetings with the directors regarding changes or the
creation of new programs and services. Decisions were made in these meetings with their input. As the director of student support services in Town C explained, “I have the title ‘director,’ but I don't ever make any decisions without talking to [other district administrators].”

In Town B, the district administration involved teachers, aides, parents, and students in the decision-making process regarding special education. This is different than the top-down approach that Owens (1998) discussed where school staff and teachers are informed by district administration of decisions. The high school special education team chairperson explained that it is a “pretty democratic process…where it could involve administrators, input from teachers, and then often they include parent and community input…They – they bring students in oftentimes as well.”

An attempt to be proactive and attentive to the needs of individual students. When making decisions regarding the programs and services to offer, the administrators in all three school districts explained that the needs of the special education students were a top concern. This was a key factor that drove decision-making. The director of pupil personnel services in Town B stated that when making decisions “the needs of the…students really dictated” their decisions and that they “evaluate[d] the needs of the students” and “consider[ed] the disability of the student.” The elementary special education supervisor in Town C explained that “we look at what is it that students need” when making decisions. The middle school special education department head in Town A stated that the programs and services were “really develop[ed] based on student needs.”

The role of budget in decision-making. The budget was also a consideration that all three school districts took into account when they made decisions regarding the special education programs and services. In Town A, which was the most affluent town in the study, the acting
assistant superintendent explained that “there's constant pressure between wanting to support the
students as best as you can with the financial realities of what that entails.” When making
decisions in Town B, the district’s middle school special education team chairperson felt “that
there is a financial factor involved.” Her counterpart at the high school also felt that “funding is
always an issue.” In Town C, the secondary special education supervisor explained they
“look[ed] at staffing and budgeting” when making decisions regarding special education.

_Funding played a critical role in determining what a district can and cannot implement
and this can present a challenge._ In addition to the budget playing a role in determining which
services and programs the town offered, it also affected special education in other areas.
Administrators in all three towns discussed the need for more space and more staffing, both of
which required more funding. In Town A, Town B, and Town C, the small size of some of the
school buildings was a problem. The middle school special education department head in Town
A said that the middle school was “bursting at the seams.” The director of pupil personnel
services explained that due to an elementary school in Town B not “hav[ing] a lot of extra
rooms,” certain special education programs were not offered in that school, so students were
bused to another school.

The superintendent in Town A felt that they had “some teachers with caseloads that are
too high and in a perfect world and they're stretched thin and that…that has ramifications.” In
Town B, some special education staff participated in “job sharing in between schools” according
to the middle school special education team chairperson; as a result, she felt that “people [we]re
pulled thin.” Her counterpart at the high school expressed concern that the district did not have
“enough paraprofessionals to provide that individualized support” and that “class sizes [were]
too big.” More staffing would help alleviate all of these concerns. The elementary special
education supervisor in Town C felt that they were “always at, at least in special ed, we're always try – looking to increase staff, whether it's paraprofessionals or s- or teaching staff.”

**District response dependent on available resources at the school level.** Each of the districts offered a variety of special education programs and services at each grade level to meet the needs of their special education population. What was offered depended on the financial, staffing, and structural resources that the districts had available.

**Programs.** In all of the districts, the programs and services were individualized to meet each student’s specific needs. How each program was structured varied for each student as a result. With multiple elementary schools in each of these towns, not every elementary school offered each program. As the superintendent in Town A explained, the reason for this was “it's just really a way to create economies on scale and efficiencies…and service.”

Inclusion, substantially separate, cognitively delayed, autism, and behavioral and emotional programs were offered in all of the school districts throughout the K-12 grades. All of the districts offered a program that focused on life skills and/or transition at the high school level. Pull out services were offered in Town A and Town C at every grade, and Town B offered them from K-8. Town C had a language learning disability program from K-12, and Town A and Town B offered it from K-8. Co-teaching was offered in Town B from K-12 and Town A had it in the elementary grades. Social skills classes were offered in elementary and middle school in Town C and at the middle school in Town A and Town B. In Town C there was a teacher for the hearing impaired for K-12 and a teacher of the visually impaired for K-8.

**Services and supports.** The following services were offered in all of the school districts: speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological therapy, and counseling services. Town A and Town B had Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) and
technology support. Town B and Town C offered adaptive physical therapy. Town A offered orientation mobility therapy, music therapy, vision support, and had a van for community-based instruction. Town B offered extended school year and home service providers.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by contingency theory. It is this theory that guided the exploration of the interviewees’ responses to questions related to their school districts’ special education decision-making.

**Contingency theory.** Contingency theory deals with how an organization adjusts and adapts to the various demands it faces. It is part of organizational theory and is also known as structural contingency theory. Contingency theory is the belief that there is no singular best way for organizations to structure themselves or to make decisions (Powers, 2000). As a result, organizations need to adapt based on their environment and the contingency factors that they encounter (Powers, 2000). This theory was used for this study because it helped with “understanding school systems and how their organizations can be adapted to meeting environmental demands” (Derr & Gabarro, 1972, p. 39) and “analyzes the internal adjustments of the organization…as it seeks to meet the shifting demands of its external or internal environment” (Hanson, 1979, p. 101).

While school administrators are in control of school districts, there are issues and circumstances that are beyond their control. These include government mandates; budget; enrollment; and costs related to operations, transportation, instruction, and salaries (Koberg, 1986; Donaldson, 1996). They are required to react, respond, and adapt as a result. Even though districts might face similar demands, how they adapt to those demands can and does differ. This study explored how special education administration responded to these challenges.
Hanson (1979) and Koberg (1986) claimed that a school system’s management system tended to be reactive instead of premeditated. In Town B, this had been the case in the past; however, with a new superintendent, that had changed. The director of pupil personnel service explained that with the old superintendent, “we're in a constant reaction mode. We're always trying to solve the problem in the minute or solve it quick, put a Band-Aid on it.” In contrast, she explained that the new superintendent liked to say that they needed “people in the batter's box,” meaning they needed to have “things waiting and – so that we have things in line.” The middle school special education team chairperson in Town B believed that information was key and that has helped the district be more proactive, since “there is so much information available that I think it’s less reactionary and more preplanning.”

Special education administrators’ responses in Town A were at odds with Hanson (1979) and Koberg’s (1986) statements. Instead, they felt that the district was more premeditated instead of proactive. The out-of-district coordinator explained that the district had “a visionary goal-setting sort of approach, where we look down the road, big picture,” which was used when making special education decisions. The elementary special education supervisor in Town C credited the director of student support services for making the district more proactive in the decision-making regarding programs and services offered. She explained, “the changes that my director currently has made, we've been able to be a little more proactive.”

No school district can plan for every situation they might unexpectedly encounter, and as a result they have to be reactive (Hanson, 1979; Koberg, 1986). When they are required to make a change, all options should be explored before a decision is made. In Town A, while administrators did strive to be premeditated, there were times when they were not able to be. The acting assistant superintendent explained, “we try our best to be proactive, but the fact is we
have to be good at reacting as well.” The high school special education team chairperson in Town B also agreed that sometimes the district had to be reactive, because sometimes something's happening or maybe we're – we're not catching that a certain group of students are – are failing or whatever. And so then we have to sort of be reactive and say, ‘What are we – this isn't working for these kids. What are we going to do about it?’

In Town C, administrators also felt that they had transitioned to be more premeditated, but that they were not always able to be so. The elementary special education supervisor explained that oftentimes “a lot of our decisions are reactive to a situation” or “it's reaction to, this is not working. We need to solve it.”

Another component of contingency theory is there is no singular method an organization should utilize when adapting (Derr & Gabarro, 1972; Powers, 2000). This is also true with special education, since no one single model or method can be applied when making decisions (Watson, 2012). Administrators interviewed in all three districts felt that their districts did not subscribe to only one method when making decisions. Methods the districts utilized include data driven, being able to justify the needs, looking at trends both in the district and in the special education population, current research, school (site) based, and problem solving. These are not always used individually, but sometimes combinations of different methods are used. The secondary special education supervisor in Town C stated that her district used “a collaboration of all of them.”

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

The findings of this study were in line with the literature discussed in chapter two. The literature review was guided by these five questions:
- What decision-making processes and special education knowledge do districts use to make programmatic and strategic decisions in service of their special education students?

- How has the history of special education changed at the federal and school district level?

- What are currently considered best practice in special education?

- What are viewed as current challenges in special education?

- What suggestions can be found for improving special education?

**School district decision-making and special education.** This section of the literature review explored how school districts made decisions relating to special education, the various paths a person can take to become a superintendent, and how due to this variety of paths, superintendents have varying degrees of preparedness.

**How decisions are made.** Andero (2000) stated that the school board and the superintendent usually collaborate to make decisions that affect the school district. This was not mentioned by any of the interviewees in any of the three districts. Instead, the school board was only mentioned at the end of the decision-making process, when it had the power to approve or veto the proposed programs. The director of student support services in Town C explained that she and her special education supervisors worked together to develop a new program. Then she “[brought] it to the superintendent and [said], ‘look, this is what we need…I have the figures and everything after I talk to my business manager to say, what would this cost me? How do we make this work?’” She explained that the school committee came in after that step because anything new that’s brought into the district has to be approved by the school committee.

So once I bring it to the superintendent, he brings it to the school committee, and then I
either have to present, or he’ll present, and then the school committee approves it, and then we post for positions, or whatever it is that we need, and then we go from there.

Data driven/evidence based. Data has become a critical part in school districts’ decision-making process since 2001, when the federal government required it be used as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (Farley-Ripple, 2012; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Kowalski, 2009). All three districts utilized data when making decisions. The middle school special education department head in Town A felt that the district’s decisions were “very much data-driven and evidence-based.” In Town C, the director of student support services explained that a critical component in decision-making was “looking at the data that’s been collected.”

Problem-solving processes. This method of decision-making requires the people involved to first understand the problem and then solve it (Van Lehn, 1990). Administrators interviewed in Town C and Town B discussed the utilization of this method when making special education decisions. The director of student support services in Town C said the following when explaining how they utilized this method,

building principals will talk to me, or the supervisors will talk to me and say, we'll have a meeting, ‘Eva, this is what's going on.’ ‘This is what we're seeing.’ ‘What about X, Y and Z? Could we do this?’ So, we – we try to figure out, problem-solve it, develop a plan of what it would look like.

Also in Town B, Laura explained the process as “we'll be discussing a problem over time, coming up with recommendations, and then trying to implement them.”

In both these quotes "we" refers to the director and the special education administrators/chairpeople/supervisors. This is important because Andero (2000); Cropper & Hill (1978); DiNatale (1994); Dynes & Pruitt (1978); Leithwood et al. (1993); Luckhurst &
Lauback (2006); Till & Valladolid (1978); and Williams (1978) believed that collaboration with colleagues, usually done through meetings, was an important way to determine other people’s views on the problem and work towards solving it.

*Site-based management.* Site-based management is when the district level gives decision-making authority to the school level (Meyer, 2009; Monk et al., 1997; Wohlstetter & McCurdy, 1991) with “principal, teachers, parents, school board members, and district-level staff” all being involved in the decision-making process (DiNatale, 1994, p. 79). No one interviewed mentioned this method directly, though in Town B teachers, aides, parents, and students were mentioned as being part of the discussion when decisions were being made.

*District’s special education knowledge and views that impact their decision-making.* Superintendents play an important role in decision-making for the school district, but lack knowledge of special education (Balt, 2000; Wigle & Wilcox, 2002). A reason for this is that administrator degrees or licensure do not require courses to be taken in special education or special education law (Balt, 2000; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Nelson, 2002; Quigney, 1997; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994; Valesky & Hirth, 1992). As a result, some superintendents have never taken a special education course (Valhi, 2006).

Only one superintendent agreed to be interviewed in this study. John had a bachelors degree, an MBA, had recently completed his doctorate of education, and held licensure in the areas of assistant superintendent and superintendent. He had held various positions, but all of them were in the district administration office and he had never worked directly with students, including special education students. As he explained, “I was always central…I began my career in central office, which is a little – little unusual for people.” He also had never taken a special education or special education law course.
Various strategies district administration employ to support special education in their districts. Keller-Allen (2009) felt that co-teaching, creating professional learning communities, hiring staff with collaboration backgrounds, ensuring all new hires regardless of their position were aware of special education issues, implementing common planning time, responding to intervention, and professional development were various strategies that could be implemented by a district to support special education. Co-teaching and professional development were mentioned by the interviewees in all three towns as strategies already in place. The secondary special education supervisor in Town C explained that, “the directors started implementing more professional development for special ed and general ed teachers.” In Town B, the middle school special education team chairperson explained that on “professional development days…there has been special trainings that we’ve been assigned up to go to.”

Hooper, Pankake, and Schroth (1999) and Idol (2006) believed that in order for inclusion to be successfully implemented and accepted, school administration needed to demonstrate that they supported this movement. This is what happened in Town C. When Eva began work as director of student support services, implementing a true inclusion model was one initiative she put into place. She acknowledges that this move did not happen overnight, explaining that it's been such a division in the past, and it's taken us really three years to kind of break down those walls to say, ‘They’re our kids. It’s not your kid and my kid. They’re our kids and we need to work together as a team to do what's best for all the kids.’

Funding. School districts receive special education funding from local education agencies, the state government, and the federal government (Ahearn, 2010; Monk et al., 1997; Parrish & Chambers, 1996). The amount of federal funding a state receives depends on how many children receive special education services in that state (Parrish & Chamber, 1996). How
states distribute special education funding was mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization in 1997 and 2004. Funding from the federal and state level, or rather the lack of funding linked to mandates, was a concern that the out-of-district coordinator in Town A voiced when she said that “these unfunded mandates that they keep handing us, even though Town A is in a better place financially, we’re still not. I mean, we still have budget concerns.”

**Issues related to allocation of funds.** How states allot their special education funding is no longer reported to the federal government due to states having trouble obtaining the data from school districts, so there is little data on how it is spent (Parrish & Chambers, 1996; Scull & Winkler, 2011). What is known is that special education costs money, and districts have to figure out how to balance the needs of the students within the budget that they have. The superintendent in Town A explained that even wealthier towns were not immune to budget issues. He said, “Schools, including – including Town A, have limited resources, so if you, there's a sort of fiscal responsibility we have to provide services that are at a reasonable cost.”

**History of special education.** This section of the literature review simply recounted the history of special education and how it evolved over the years. As evident in the interviews, all districts were dutifully attentive to the current federal expectations and mandates and worked hard to meet expectations as presented by state law and state education mandates.

**Current best practices in special education.** Best practices in special education are defined as “classroom teaching and management techniques which have been shown to accomplish specific goals in an efficient and effective manner” (Peck & Scarpati, 2010, p. 4). Peters & Heron (1993) believed that when determining if a particular program model or educational strategy is best practice, the following criteria should be considered: expert opinion
(keeping in mind that it can be biased or conflicting), empirical research support, values based, theoretically based, consensus in existing literature, desired outcome was produced, and socially valid (Peters & Heron, 1993).

**Inclusion.** Inclusion is defined by the National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) (1994) as:

the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe handicaps, in their neighborhood school, in age-appropriate general education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids (for the child and the teacher) both to assure the child’s success – academic, behavioral, and social – and to prepare the child to participate as a full and contributing member of the society (p. 1-2).

Inclusion is the least restrictive environment (LRE) for many students and has been a major reform movement in education (Bennett et al., 1997; Biklen, 1985; Cole & Meyer, 1991; Ferguson, 1995; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Sailor et al., 1989; Slavin, 1997; Zollers et al., 1999). Through inclusion services, students with special needs are educated in the general education classroom, which allows them to learn with their peers, build social relationships, and develop self-esteem; this is why it is considered a best practice. All three school districts offered inclusion at each grade level.

In order for inclusion to be successful, school leadership must believe in it and help guide it (Furney et al., 2005; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Henderson, 1994; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Sindelar et al., 2006; Stanovich, 1996; Waldron et al., 2011; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996). This was the case in Town C. When Eva was appointed to her position as director of student support services, she strongly believed in inclusion and wanted the district to follow this model. She explained that “inclusion wasn’t
always part of the elementary programming here in Town C. When I first got here, at the elementary level, I don’t think there were any inclusion programs at all.” Eva did not force inclusion and acknowledged that it was an area the district was still working on. She focused on training staff so that it would be successful. At the high school level, she said

Like last year I spent a lot of money, a lot of my grant money, my 274 Grant money to send general and special ed staff to inclusion workshops together at the secondary level. I mean, I think it was one of the first times ever that special ed money was used to – to join special ed teachers and general ed teachers together, to go to the workshop, because it’s great to have a special ed teacher go to an inclusion workshop, but you need to have the general ed teacher there, too, to also see what that would look like.

This is important, because school staff need professional development in the area of inclusion for this model to be successful (Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Henderson, 1994; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Kaff, 2004; McLeskey, 2011; Peters, 2004; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996; Weiner, 2003). Collaboration between special educators and general educators is essential in inclusion (Brownell et al., 2005b; Carter et al., 2009; Cook & Friend, 1991; Downing, 2006; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend, 2000; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kaff, 2004; Patterson et al., 2008; Snell et al., 1997; Weiner, 2003; West & Cannon, 1988).

**Severely disabled.** Inclusion has been identified as best practice when servicing the needs of the severely disabled special education population (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2008; Halvorsen & Sailor, 1990; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Salend, 2001). For these students an inclusion placement requires different goals that should focus on improving the quality of life and should include communication and social interaction (Arthur-Kelly et al., 2008; Borthwick-Duffy et al., 1996).
Each of the three school districts offered a variety of different programs to best meet the needs of their diverse population. All offered a specific program at the elementary, middle, and high school grades for students with cognitive disabilities. These programs were as a whole considered self-contained, however it really depended on the student’s needs. For example in Town A, the middle school special education department head explained that at the high school the “specialized programs all have the capacity to be [self-contained], but currently…all of the students in them with the exception of only one is in the building in general ed for at least some portion of the day.” With regard to the specific programs in Town B, the elementary special education team chairperson said that “those students might go out for other subjects into the regular classroom with support from an aide and then there are other students that stay there for all subjects.” The same was true in Town C; the elementary special education supervisor explained, “if there's room for inclusion, those students are included.”

Co-teaching. A model of inclusion is co-teaching, which is also known as collaborative teaching, cooperative teaching or team teaching (Austin, 2001; Bauwens et al., 1989; Carlson, 1986; Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Embury & Kroeger, 2012; Fennick, 2001; Fennick & Liddy 2001; Walsh, 1991; Walther-Thomas et al., 1996). Co-teaching is when two or more teachers, usually a general/content teacher and a special educator or service provider, share the responsibility of teaching a set group of students (Conderman & Bresnahan, 2007; Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Salend, 2001; Turnbull et al., 1999).

Town A had co-teaching in the elementary grades and Town B had it in K-12. While Town A only had co-teaching in some elementary classrooms, the superintendent in Town A would “love to do more co-teaching.” The middle school special education department head from Town A agreed and would like to see co-teaching happen at the middle school. She
explained that they “have our special ed teachers who are in the general ed classes but they're not true co-teaching assignments here in this building.”

*Autism programs.* As a result of a growing population, school districts have created programs in district that focus on educating their autistic students rather than sending the students to out-of-district private autism schools. Programs that include the necessary grade level content, explicitly teach communication, transition, and social skills (Baker, 2005; Humes, 2008; Iovannone et al., 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Olley, 1999; Sterling-Turner & Jordan, 2007; Weiss, 2007) and utilize a functional approach to challenging behaviors (Dunlap et al., 2001; Iovannone et al., 2003; Lynch & Irvine, 2009) are considered best practice. An autism program was offered at each grade level in each of the three school districts. Town A and Town B were at different stages in the process, but administrators in those towns discussed how they utilized private autism programs when creating their in-district program. At first Town A had a partnership with the New England Center for Children (NECC), however the district decided to take over the program completely. The out-of-district coordinator explained the process the district took when making this transition,

we have had a partnership with NECC for an autism strand program. We met with them a couple of years ago and let them know that we really were feeling that we could take over the program. We put in place an exit strategy so that we had some transitions involved. We involved parents in those decisions. We did lots of on-site observations at NECC. We included them along the way with our step-down and our pullback from them.
Town B is currently in a partnership with Amego, Inc., which is an autism support/school. The director of pupil personnel services explained that the district had originally considered developing the program themselves, but the needs of the student really – students really dictated that we needed people who were already trained in the methods of ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis) and all that that means. And we had a situation where there wasn't a lot of trust on the parent part for the district and that's sort of what led us to the partnership program and as we look the goal of the partnership is that the district would eventually take over the program.

Town C currently has autism programs starting in their preschool through high school. They offer both self-contained and inclusive autism programs. The director of student support services explained that the district already had an intensive autism program, but needed to create a new autism preschool program in the 2012 school year due to an influx of preschoolers through EI [early intervention] that were getting 20 hours, 25 hours of ABA services, in EI and needed to continue with some – some type of programming like that in a preschool setting, but also needed to be around typical peers in an integrated preschool program.

*Problem-solving approach.* When determining how best to help a student reach a behavioral or academic goal, the student’s IEP team should collaborate using a problem-solving approach (Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Miller et al., 1998; Nunn & McMahan, 2001; West & Cannon, 1988). It is the different components that go into this approach that make it a best practice (Ross, 1995; Shaw & Swerdik, 1995). The components include: a team approach (Carter & Sugai, 1989; Kabler & Carlton, 1982; Shaw & Swerdik, 1995; Simpson et al., 1993), collaboration (Carter et al., 2009; Cook & Friend, 1991; Downing, 2006; Fennick & Liddy,
2001; Friend, 2000; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Kaff, 2004; Patterson et al., 2008; Snell et al., 1997; Weiner, 2003; West & Cannon, 1988), parent involvement (Bennett et al., 1997; Henderson, 1994; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Peters, 2004; Pijl & Frissen, 2009; Ross-Hill, 2009; Salend, 2006; Stanovich, 1996), outcome oriented (Carta, Schwartz, Atwater, & McConnell, 1991; Stitchter et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Welner, 2010), and constant monitoring of progress (Carta et al., 1991; Stitchter et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Welner, 2010).

While no one interviewed directly discussed the use of problem-solving approach, Michelle, the middle school special education team chairperson in Town B, did mention the various components that it comprises. She explained that the “IEP teams make those decisions regarding individual students and what their needs are” and that they “collaboratively work with parents and look at what – what a student actually requires.” One way the district determines what a student requires was “teachers have ways of measuring learning, and whether or not the learning is actually happening…When we have IEP meetings, we utilize all those different areas to assess whether somebody is actually making progress.” What Michelle explained demonstrates the district’s use of a team approach, collaboration, parent involvement, and monitoring student progress.

**Transition planning.** In the 1990 IDEA, transition planning became part of the IEP. To help write this section of the IEP, transition assessments are recommended since they collect data about the student’s strengths, weaknesses, and interests (Thoma et al., 2002). This information should be shared with the student to help increase their self-determination, which is considered best practice (Agran et al., 1999; Denney & Daviso, 2012; Friend & Bursuck, 1999; Salend, 2001; Thoma et al., 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2000; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998).
This is an area the towns were still working on. The middle and high school special education team chairpeople both mentioned that due to new mandates, Town B was focusing on professional development in that area. Michelle, the middle school special education team chairperson in Town B, said, “Some new regulations came down with transitional planning recently, so there has been special trainings that we’ve been assigned up to go to.” Laura, the high school special education team chairperson in Town B, also mentioned that when a “mandate is coming down…that generally might be followed up with some type of professional development if necessary. Like I think of like transition planning when that came about and, and that's still, PD (Professional Development) is still going on with that.” In Town A, the out-of-district coordinator explained that the director of student services recently returned from a conference on transition and as a result the district now had a “guide to helping students to become more independent with regard to the special education process, and to be more involved and more comfortable with advocating for themselves throughout the process.”

Transition was mentioned a few times in the interviews, but instead of focusing on the students’ transition planning it was about the students’ transition through the educational process and out of high school. In Town A, the acting assistant superintendent mentioned that the district focused on transition planning with regard to what the students moving on through the educational system would require to continue to be successful. He explained, “we’ll talk about the needs of specific students who are transitioning and what their needs are, and then we make sure that we programs support for the students.” The middle school special education team chairperson in Town B said the chairpeople met and “talk[ed] about our children on IEPs and the transitions and the needs that they [we]re going to have.”
The out-of-district coordinator mentioned that a plan for Town A’s future was regarding transition and the adult service piece. She said the focus was on getting kids ready to be valuable members of the community and to be able to stay in their communities. So, we’re working really, really hard at creating programs for those kids, and at the same time working with the community agencies, so that when the kids do turn 22, or actually get a diploma, that there is a place in their world that they can feel accomplished and important and become important members of society.

Like Town A, the school district in Town C is also focusing on transition. The elementary special education supervisor explained that transitions is a big issue, so we already started talking about budgeting for next year and hiring, possibly, a transition coordinator. We built in that life skills program based on, again, the needs of, what we're hearing from the state saying, ‘You need to make sure these kids are ready for life, ready for work, ready for career.’ So, we're creating programs based on what the state's saying and then what our district’s actually needing at the time.

She also explained that while the district had already put transition plans in place for the lower functioning students and transition plans for students that stay in district until the age of 22, they were focusing on transition needs for the rest of their special education population. She said that we're starting to look at, all right, what about just the typical special ed student who's just an average kid that needs some support at the el- at the high school level? But then also at the middle school level, those kiddos.
**Individualization.** Special education needs to be individualized to meet the student’s needs and, consequently, this should be thought of as the key word in special education (Spaulding, 2009). Spaulding (2009) and Zigmond (2003) claimed that just because something is considered best practice, it is not necessarily best practice for a particular student. The services, programs, accommodations, and modifications a student receives should be determined based on what would benefit that student. All three school districts discussed the importance of thinking of the students, their needs, and how best to educate them to meet their needs.

The acting assistant superintendent in Town A explained that all decisions the district made were “based on the needs of the students. So it’s, we look at what range of disabilities our students have and what their academic needs are, what they’re going to need to make effective progress.” As explained in the severely disabled and autism sections, each district offered a specific program for this population. However, while the programs as a whole were considered self-contained, inclusion services were determined on an individual basis.

**Current challenges in special education.** There are various challenges that researchers have discussed with regard to special education at the government, district, and classroom level. During the interviews, the administrators were asked what challenges their district faced with regard to special education.

**Certified teachers.** Researchers such as Billingsley and McLeskey (2004); Brownell, Bishop and Sindelar (2005a); Brownell et al. (2005b); Cegelka and Alvarado (2000); Kaff (2004); Lenihan (2010); and McCray et al. (2011) mentioned the shortage of special education certified teachers. However, none of the administrators interviewed discussed this as a challenge their district faced.
**Funding.** Cost is a challenge associated with special education (Berman et al., 2001a; Earles-Vollrath, 2004; Kaff, 2004; Lynch & Irvine, 2009; Peters, 2004; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). Parish and Wolman (2004) explained that “state and federal funding have not always risen proportionately” with the increases in special education standards (p. 66). Budget challenges were an issue that administrators in Town A and Town B mentioned. The out-of-district coordinator from Town A even referenced the difficulties of having standards imposed on schools, but not the funds to back it up. She said

I think we’re not unlike any other district in this state, which would be these unfunded mandates that they keep handing us. And even though Town A is in a better place financially, we’re still not. I mean, we still have budget concerns. It’s always a difficult time of year when it’s time to talk about the budget.

In Town B, the high school special education team chairperson said “funding is always an issue and whether or not we have enough of what we need.”

Special education costs have gone up as a result of more students having significant special needs and requiring more expensive services (Berman et al., 2001a; Berman et al., 2001b). The superintendent in Town A brought up this issue when he said

more students are showing up to our doorsteps that really, sadly, twenty-five years ago, thirty years, probably wouldn't even be alive. So, they're coming with much more complex needs. So we're really struggling with how to handle these very fragile, in some cases, medically complex students in – in the building, right? I mean, it's just, we're trying to balance this that – that they – they actually have medical needs, but we're the educators and it's, the lines get blurred, I don't have to tell you, the lines get blurred quite a bit.
**Lack of awareness.** Members of the IEP team lacking knowledge about the different services the district has available and when it would be appropriate to utilize them is another current challenge in special education (Earles-Vollrath, 2004; Dodge et al., 2002; Fish, 2004; Fisher & Gardner, 1999; Malone & Gallagher, 2008). Members of the team who might not be aware of this include the school administration, teachers (Dodge et al., 2002; Fisher & Gardner, 1999), and parents (Fish, 2004; Fisher & Gardner, 1999; Malone & Gallagher, 2008).

No one interviewed addressed this as a concern they felt their district faced in special education. The only example of lack of awareness that was mentioned was in Town C. Parents were only made aware of new programs when the district implemented them. The elementary special education supervisor said that “unfortunately, the last people to know is usually the parents.” Unlike in Town A and Town C, the parents were not part of the process in Town B to create new programs.

**Inclusion.** Even though inclusion is considered best practice, it is also considered a challenge in special education. Borthwick-Duffy et al. (1996) and Thompkins and Deloney (1995) worried that the individual student’s differences were not considered when determining placement; the student was just put into inclusion. Students that are deaf or deaf with multiple disabilities might not benefit from being placed in an inclusive setting. Students that are deaf or deaf with multiple disabilities might not benefit from being placed in an inclusive setting. Borthwick-Duffy et al. (1996); Cohen (1994); Ewing and Jones (2003); Innes (1994); Liu (1995); and Thompkins and Deloney (1995) felt that this population would be better educated in a separate class or school where they would be taught by teachers specifically trained to work with them. In addition, these students would be able to socialize with their peers, because they could communicate independently.
Town C was the only district where administrators discussed having a deaf special education population. Eva, the director of student support services, explained that in the past the district “would consult with and contract out with Clarke School, but now it got to be such a big need within our own district, that we just hired our own teacher of the deaf, part-time.” Eva went on to explain that while the teacher of the deaf currently “works 20 hours – no, 19 – 19 ½ hours a week,” she feels that this position could become full time because, “I have another student transitioning from Clarke School next year.”

An interesting note on this topic is that Eva had worked as “a teacher of the hearing-impaired for the Willie Ross School for the Deaf in Longmeadow, Mass.,” held a certification for teacher of the deaf, and had a masters degree in deaf education.

**Lack of training.** Teachers do not feel like they are prepared to meet the needs for the students with special needs in their classrooms (Austin, 2001; Buell et al., 1999; Chaisson et al., 2006; Kosko & Wilkins, 2009) or to collaborate with their colleagues (Bunch & Valeo, 1997; Cramer & Nevin, 2006; Embury & Kroeger, 2012; Friend et al., 2010; Schneider, 2007; Vaugh et al., 1997) or parents (Murray et al., 2008). The secondary special education supervisor in Town C felt that a challenge the district faced was the need for “more collaboration, more common planning time for special education teachers and general education teachers to be working together for planning to create a more effective co-teach model within the district down the road.”

**Self-determination.** Research by Bambara et al. (1998); Denney and Daviso (2012); Mason et al. (2004); Thoma et al. (2002); and Wehmeyer et al. (2000) indicates that teaching students self-determination is an area where special education teachers struggle. However, this was not a topic that was mentioned by the administrators interviewed.
Discipline. Since 1997, school districts have had to follow regulations in IDEA with regard to discipline of students with special needs when the behavior is a manifestation of their disability. When a student’s negative behavior impacts their own learning or that of their peers, a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) needs to be done. This should then be used to create a behavior intervention plan.

Administrators in Town B and Town C mentioned FBAs. The elementary special education team chairperson in Town B used to “complete FBAs” as part of a position she previously had held in the district. The elementary special education supervisor in Town C explained that when determining if a student should be placed in their behavior program, they “do an FBA, functional behavioral assessment. We ha- pull in our service team to get information before we just put a student in there.”

Besides talking about the behavior programs the districts offered, no other interviewees mentioned discipline as a problem. In Town B, the elementary special education team chairperson explained that the district’s behavior program utilized a point system to help manage student behaviors. She said “for students that are typically able to access the general ed curriculum, but their behavior interferes, so they be at – they're on a point system working their way into the general ed classroom based on their behavior.”

The director of student support services in Town C said that when deciding if a student could make effective progress in their behavior program versus sending him/her to an out-of-district school,

We look at the data that’s been collected, whether it be a kid that’s having some significant behavioral issues. How many times have they spent in time out? How many outbursts? How many this? How – how many issues have they had. So we try to look at
the data. We try to look at what’s been done. We’ve looked at is the programming that we have in district appropriate?

When asked about what she would like to see in the future regarding special education in Town C, the elementary special education supervisor said “there was talk about creating our own in-house, a in-house suspension program, ’cause I know that we're not going to be able suspend kids soon.”

**Parents.** There are two main challenges with regard to parents and special education. The first is that parents feel that schools do not do enough to include them in the special education process (Kasari et al., 1999; Ryndak et al., 1996). Hollums et al. (1998) claimed that one challenge that occurs in special education was due to the shift from services being family centered in early intervention to student centered; as a result, parents feel disconnected. On the other side, schools face a challenge when parents do not attend their child’s IEP meetings because IDEA requires that parents be involved in their child’s education (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Neither of these challenges were mentioned by any of the administrators in any of the districts.

**Suggestions for addressing current challenges in special education.** While there are challenges that currently face special education, researchers are exploring methods to solve these challenges.

**Funding.** There are no easy solutions for fixing the challenges related to special education funding. Researchers have offered various strategies. Berman et al. (2001a) believed that there was a need for reforming special education finances and suggested that it had to happen at the state and federal government level. Berman et al. (2001b) believed the solution
was to divide the costs associated with special education between the state and federal
governments, where each would be responsible for specific services the student may require.

None of the administrators interviewed used the words “funding” or “budget” when
discussing how to fix the challenges they felt their district faced with regard to special education.
Nor did they address how they felt special education funding should be handled at the state and
federal level. However, the solutions they did mention required funding. Topics mentioned by
administrators in all three districts included more professional development, more special
education staff, and more building space.

Certified teachers. While some states have started to employ alternative routes for
obtaining teacher licensure to get around the NCLB requirement of fully certified teachers, no
one interviewed for this study discussed this (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; McCray et al.,
2011; Snell et al., 1997).

Preparing teachers. Fixing the problem of teachers not feeling prepared to teach the
special education students they have in their classrooms is a problem whose solution needs to be
met at the higher education level in the teacher preparation programs (Austin, 2001; Buell et al.,
1999; Dieker & Berg, 2002; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Kaff, 2004; West & Cannon, 1988). The
director of student support services in Town C was the only administrator to mention the college
preparation programs their district’s newer teachers had gone through prior to working in the
district. She said

we actually hired a lot of new special ed teachers, just for different reasons, teachers
moving or changing positions or whatever, and the new teachers that we’ve hired, the
newer teachers who have just recently either gotten out of school, and have learned that
this is the way it’s supposed to be, and this is what inclusion would look – looks like if
you do it the right way. Those are the teachers that are having the best success with the
general ed teachers, and those walls are actually coming down.

Austin (2001); Buell et al. (1999); Fennick and Liddy (2001); Friend et al. (2010); Kosko
and Wilkins (2009); and West and Cannon (1988) believed that school districts needed to offer
in-service programs to their teachers in the area of educating all students and working
collaboratively. This was happening to a certain extent in all three districts. Administrators
discussed the need for more professional development as a way to improve special education in
their district. In Town C, the elementary special education supervisor explained that the director
of student support services “started implementing more professional development for special ed
and general ed teachers.” Town B’s director of pupil personnel services discussed how the
district was “looking at things like training all of our staff, or a good number of our staff in
Wilson, because that's been kind of an area where we struggle.” However in Town A, the only
professional development mentioned was for the special education staff. The elementary special
education department head explained that the district’s “special ed teachers have lots of
professional development in a lot of different areas to increase their toolbox.”

Acceptance by all. In order for special education change to happen, all the administration,
teachers, parents, students, and school staff need to believe in the change (Fullan & Miles, 1992;
Weiner, 2003). The attitudes and beliefs they have towards this movement can result in a
positive or negative outcome.

Town C’s move in recent years to an inclusion model has been discussed in previous
sections, including those on inclusion and teacher preparation programs. In the last section, Eva,
the director of student support services, discussed how the walls were coming down and more
general education teachers were accepting this change. Eva went on to say that “we have a long
way to go in that area, but it’s gotten, I can honestly say the feedback that we’ve gotten, it’s
gotten 100 percent better already.” Eva was helping this process by sending
special ed teachers and general ed teachers together, to go to the workshop, because it’s
great to have a special ed teacher go to an inclusion workshop, but you need to have the
general ed teacher there, too, to also see what that would look like.

**Parents.** Researchers have found that another area of special education that needs to be
improved is the relationship between parents and school. Staples and Diliberto (2010) believed
that by increasing parent involvement in school, parents would realize they are important
participants in their child’s education. This would then, hopefully, increase their attendance at
their child’s IEP meetings. Parents need to be viewed as equal partners in their child’s
education, even if they lack the educational knowledge. They have an understanding of their
child and it is important that special educators listen to their input (Fish, 2008; Hollums et al.,
1998; Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Parents were involved in various aspects of special education in each of the three
districts. In Town A, the middle school special education department head explained that when
creating new programs, after the administrators and service providers had a program planned out,
they would “involve parents and the bigger school community.” The out-of-district coordinator
also discussed that when determining a student’s placement, the district considered what “the
parents want [because] some parents would prefer that students’ needs be met outside of the
school district. And so that all has to be taken into account.”

The out-of-district coordinator provided a specific example of how Town A worked with
parents. She explained that “we involved parents in those decisions” regarding the exit strategy
for transitioning the autism program over to being completely run by Town A staff without the
support of NECC. By involving the parents, the district acknowledged that the parents know their children and demonstrated consideration for parents’ opinions regarding how best to meet their child’s needs.

The director of pupil personnel services in Town B discussed how in her role as director of pupil personnel services, she “always consider[ed] the parents and what they think is best.” In Town B, parents were involved in the decision-making process regarding programs. The high school special education team chairperson explained that once the district administration determined a new service or program to meet the needs of the special education population, they then “brought it to the parents and had those discussions.” The middle school special education team chairperson felt that the district “collaboratively work[ed] with parents and look at what – what a student actually require[d] in the IEP.”

Eva, the director of student support services in Town C, acknowledged that the parents know their child best and because of that, there are times when the district needs to “hold meetings with parents to make sure, ‘Is there something else going on in the outside that we don’t know about?’” Parents also play a role in the IEP creation process in Town C. At IEP meetings Eva explained that accommodations, services, programs, goals, and objectives were “discussed at the meeting and changed, if they need to be, or additions made, or things taken out if the parent doesn’t agree with something.”

**Homework.** To improve homework completion rates, school districts can utilize a variety of different strategies on the part of the school, teacher, student, and parent. These can range from having a homework policy (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Cooper & Nye, 1994) to increasing parent involvement by posting the homework and grades online (Bursuck et al., 1999; Epstein et al., 1999). No administrators in any of the three towns discussed homework.
Technology. Teachers and students can utilize technology to address some of the challenges they face. School districts need to make sure that the educators are aware of the different technology the district has available, so that they are able to utilize it and make suggestions in IEP meetings as to what technology can be used to help the student make effective progress (Taylor, 2005). Campbell and Halbert (2002) found that teachers would like the district to provide them with cell phones and laptops for when they are in the field.

As director of student support services, Eva in Town C said, “we're really trying, as far as technology goes, to kind of provide our staff with what they need so that they can provide the students with what they need.” She provided an example of the technology she has been able to implement when she explained:

I've done a lot of this year and last year…I got a grant for our preschool programs. I was able to buy eight iPads for the preschool…programs, as well as with software for the kids to use and the staff to use. This year, I've just purchased 14 iPads for all my related services providers for speech and OT, the OTAs (occupational therapy assistants) and the SLPAs (speech and language pathologist assistants) to be using in their therapy sessions with students.

Some students require technology as part of their IEP and Bausch and Ault (2008) recommended that the team use the National Assistive Technology Research Institute form to help ensure the technology was utilized. In the classroom, teachers can utilize assistive technology (Gardner et al., 2003; MacArthur, 1996; Taylor, 2005; Wetzel, 1996).

The out-of-district coordinator stated that technology is phenomenal in this district [Town A]. Just this past year, we dealt with an initiative to put a Chromebook in every high school student’s hands and that’s actually
happened. And there are plans to move on down into middle school to make that happen as well…If a student needs a piece of equipment, then [we] find a way to do it.

Even though Town A has a great deal of technology already, the elementary special education department head said that with regard to the future of special education, “the district is looking at technology.” With regard to technology in Town B, the middle school special education team chairperson said “well, we have technology that’s a beautiful thing. So we have classroom iPads, we have SMART boards.” In Town C, the director of student support services explained “we have a lot of assistive technology that's provided here for students.” In addition to having a great deal of assistive technology, Nikki, the elementary special education supervisor, stated that Town C had “assistive technology folks that assist us” and worked with the special education department with determining “how the technology's disseminated.” With regard to the future, Nikki stated “SMART boards are in majority of all the classrooms, but still adding any type of technology I'd like to see continued.”

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted, even though the study was carried out successfully. One limitation is the small sample size. Only three school districts participated in the study, and not every administrator connected with the district’s special education decision-making process was interviewed. The school districts were all medium-sized and located in suburban towns in southeastern Massachusetts. While the study helped the researcher better understand how school districts made special education decisions, the study did not represent school districts of smaller or larger sizes. Larger school districts may approach special education decision-making differently due to having a larger special education population; multiple schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; or different funding. The same can be said for
school districts in rural settings, but with smaller numbers and/or fewer schools. In addition, all three school districts were in Massachusetts, so they all faced the same state level mandates and funding. School districts in different states will face different state mandates and funding. While the study’s findings do answer the question proposed, the study does not answer the question completely for all school districts in the country.

Fifty-three school districts in Massachusetts with similar school structures were contacted to participate in this study. They all had multiple elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. When originally approached in the summer of 2013, fourteen superintendents expressed interest in participating. The others either did not reply to the email or declined. Once formally approached in the fall of 2013, many superintendents did not respond to the email or declined. In the end, the three school districts utilized were selected for this study because the superintendent agreed that the district could be part of the study. Within those school districts, not everyone approached agreed to be interviewed. This limits the data that was collected, because other school districts could have resulted in different responses based on having a different experience.

“Interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms” (Stringer, 2007). When being interviewed, people can be nervous and/or struggle to recall information. In addition, they are relaying the information from their point of view. While multiple interviews were conducted in each of the three school districts, it is not guaranteed that everything was learned about that district with regard to how they make decisions and the services and programs they provide.

School administrators involved with special education decision-making were the people interviewed in this study. This study did not look into how parents, teachers, or students felt
about the district’s response to mandates, decision-making processes, programs and services offered, current challenges in special education, or the future of special education in these districts. The data in this study is solely from the school administrator’s point of view.

Another limitation of the study is the timeline of data collected. A few administrators interviewed had not been in their position for an extended length of time in that school district, including two administrators who had only held their current position since the start of the school year. As a result, they did not have first hand knowledge or experience relating to some of the questions asked.

Conclusion

This study was guided by the research question: In the context of current expectations as set forth by federal legislation for providing special education students with appropriate instructional support, how do suburban school districts make programmatic and strategic decisions regarding district policies, services, programs, strategies, and use of resources to meet the needs of their special education students? School district administrators provided insight through interviews as to how their school districts responded to mandates, made decisions relating to special education, and set up their programs and services. While each district is slightly different with regard to size, population diversity, and economics, common themes emerged relating to how they made special education decisions.

In all of the districts, the decision-making process with regard to special education involved the input of multiple district staff members, though mostly at the administration level. This supports Owens’ (1998) identification of the top-down approach most districts employed, where school staff and teachers were informed of special education decisions by district administration. However, one of the districts did involve teachers, parents, and students in
decision-making. Staff members noted that this was a new process due to a new superintendent, and they felt it was “more inclusive” and a “democratic process.”

The needs of the students, along with the budget, helped guide the decisions made by each of the participating districts. The districts tried to be proactive with their planning and decisions to ensure that the needs of the special education students were being met. Budget restrictions were a concern that all the districts had to consider when determining how best to meet the students’ needs. In addition, financial, staffing, and structural resources also played a role in what each district offered for services and programs at each grade level.

Research discussed in the literature review supports the different ways these three school districts made decisions. Each district utilized various approaches when making decisions and did not rely solely on one method. In addition, the districts also supported their special education population in a variety of ways. The school districts involved in the study offered a variety of special education programs, services, and practices that researchers consider to be best practice.

Each school district faced challenges related to special education. Current research on this topic found various areas of challenges with regard to special education. Not all of the areas discussed in the research were mentioned by the interviewees. Funding was a main challenge found in both the research and as a theme in the interviews.

There has been a great deal of research on suggestions for how to address special education challenges. When the interviewees were asked for their suggestions for how to better address perceived problems with special education, professional development was mentioned. This was an area researchers also felt would help improve special education.
This study demonstrates that school districts make decisions that individualize their special education programs to meet the needs of their special education population, based on the students’ needs and the district’s access to resources. Therefore, special education procedures, programs, services, and practices vary from district to district. One might expect this, since it is the individual needs of the students that are important and the districts are ensuring that those needs are being met for all students within each district.

**Future Studies**

The following list represents recommendations for future research:

- Expansion to include more school districts
- Compare and contrast small school districts versus larger school districts
- Compare and contrast special education teachers’ views of district decision-making versus special education administrators’ views of district decision-making
- Exploring parents’ views relating to the school districts decision-making process and programs and services provided

This study, and the findings from it, will encourage future research on the topic of how school districts make decisions relating to special education programs and services as a result of state and federal mandates. Only three school districts were involved in this study. By including a larger number of districts, the data gathered could be generalized since it would include a greater population. Small and large school districts face different challenges. In this study, smaller school districts were used. Problems these districts mentioned, like not having enough students with similar special education disabilities to constantly make use of specific programs, may not be problems for larger school districts. Special education teachers are on the frontline, and it would be interesting to learn more about their perspectives regarding how special
education decisions are made in their district and how these compare to what special education administrators perceive. It would also be interesting to explore in future studies how parents feel about their school district’s decision-making processes and the programs and services that the district offers.

The field of education, specifically special education, is constantly changing due to new policies, laws, and mandates, as well as the diverse needs of the students. In special education, current best practice, challenges, and ways to address these challenges evolve as schools are forced to make adjustments to meet the needs of the students. As these changes occur, more studies should be done to explore the changes school districts make as a result.

**Implications for Practice**

This study is important to the field of education, specifically the field of special education, because it explores how school districts make decisions regarding the programs and services they provide for their special education population. Due to the structure of school districts, the teachers on the frontlines are not always aware of the process in place regarding the determination and creation of the programs the district offers. This top-down approach can cause some teachers to respond negatively to the changes made. Only one of the districts interviewed addressed this top-down structure by involving teachers in the decision-making process or the planning process of new programs.

In addition, some teachers lack the training necessary to fully embrace the changes that are happening in education and special education. A shift in teacher preparation programs will help to educate new generations of teachers to prepare them for the diverse educational needs in their classrooms and how to work collaboratively with their colleagues. Eva in Town C said she was already seeing this in the new staff she had hired. For teachers already in the field,
professional development should be offered. Administrators in this study discussed the importance of providing professional development to the teachers, so that the new initiatives in special education the district undertook would be successful.

School district administrators are faced with having to balance the budget, offer the optimal programs and services, all while meeting state and federal mandates and laws. State and federal laws and mandates related to special education provide guidelines for what special education looks like in each district, but they do not provide an exact blueprint for each district to refer to when setting up their special education programs and services. Therefore, while special education is implemented differently among districts, the services and programs offered are comparable (Chaikind, Danielson, & Brauen, 1993). This was found to be true in the three districts in the study. Each offered similar programs and services, but also specialized their programs and services based on the needs of their special education population. In addition, each administrator interviewed made it clear that they were doing the best they could to ensure that their special education students needs were being met, since meeting the needs of this population was a driving force behind the decisions they made.

Next Steps

Special education programs and services offered in public school districts have been evolving since 1975 with the creation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Teachers are now expected to educate a diverse population of students with varying levels of needs in their classrooms. Classroom teachers also need to work collaboratively with special education teachers in the general education setting. New teacher programs are preparing future teachers for this new way of teaching. School districts need to provide effective professional development to support teachers already in district who might not have had the training in their
undergraduate or graduate programs. New teachers will also benefit from these professional
development courses. Collaboration requires time. General education and special education
teachers need a set time in their schedule to work together to meet the needs of all the students in
the classroom.

School district administrators should also consider special education teachers as a
resource when making special education decisions. They are on the frontlines. In addition to
having firsthand knowledge of the needs of the school district’s special education population,
they also have working relationships with the parents. Special education teachers are a valuable
resource to the district.

**Personal Reflection**

The journey through this study has been personally meaningful, since I am a special
education teacher on the frontlines. I have been in my current district for ten years and have had
two different superintendents, the most recent one for the past eight years. I am unsure of how
special education decisions are made in my own district. I am also unsure of the process
followed for the creation of programs. Both happen at the administration level, though I know at
times even the special education department administrators at the secondary and middle school
levels are not part of the process. The staff members who teach the programs are told what they
will be doing, rather than asked for input. This can make teacher buy-in to the program difficult,
because teachers might lack the training or expertise to affectively assist these students. This
July, a new superintendent took over in my district, so maybe things will be different. This being
my firsthand experience with how school districts make special education decisions, I wanted to
explore how other school districts made special education related decisions through this study.
Robin in Town A said something that resonated with me when she was talking about how in a smaller school district, programs evolve and/or disappear depending on the needs of the special education population. She said that as a result, the special education teachers “can't get a niche.” I would agree with her statement. General education teachers usually teach the same grade each year, so they are able to develop a toolbox full of information and material. Each year in special education is a new challenge, even if the teacher is assigned to the same grade. Special educators have to learn about the students on their caseload and the diverse needs of the students; ensure the students’ schedules are accurate; educate the teachers working with these students about the students’ strengths, weaknesses, goals, accommodations, and modifications; and build parent relationships, all within the first week of school. Some of this technically has to happen the first day of school prior to students starting, so that when the student starts school their IEPs are implemented. In addition to this, in my school, to make it fair for the general education teachers, special education programs are moved from team to team every two years. As a result, every two years I need to build new relationships or reestablish relationships with the general education teachers. Many times there is just one special education teacher responsible for working with multiple general education teachers and the schedule does not allow for the time required to effectively collaborate. It really does make it hard to find “my niche” when I have to start over every two years.

This study has provided me with some insight into how other school districts make decisions regarding their special education programs, services, and practices to implement in their district. While it does not give me insight into my own district, it does give me faith that my own district administrators make decisions with the students’ best interests in mind.
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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interviewee: _____________________________________________________________

Location of Interview: ___________________________________ Date: ____________

Title of Interviewee: ___________________________________________________

Directions for interview: Good ___________________. Today I will be asking you questions about your school district’s special education programs and services to gather data for my research paper for my Doctorate program at Northeastern University. I will be starting by asking background questions on you to learn more about your educational experience.

To help ensure the accuracy of your responses, I would like to use a recording device. Do I have your permission to record the interview?

Background on Interviewee:

How long have you been in this position in this town?

Have you held this position in another town?

Follow up: For how many years have you held this position during your career overall, including in other towns?

Have you held any other positions in this town?

Follow up: What positions have you held and for how long were you in those positions?

Have you held any other positions in other school districts?

Follow up: What positions have you held and for how long were you in those positions?

In any of your positions, did you work directly with students with special needs?

What degrees do you hold?

What certifications do you hold?

Special Education Questions:

The following questions will relate to elementary school.
What special education programs and services does your district offer at the elementary school level?

Since your school district has multiple elementary schools, are the same programs and services offered at all the elementary schools?

To the best of your knowledge, how long has the district offered these special education programs and services?

Could you please indicate if any of these programs are considered self-contained? This means that the students receive the majority of their academic teaching in a special education class.

Is there a set criteria that is in writing for placing a child in a specific program or service?

**The following questions are related to middle school.**

What special education programs and services does your district offer at the middle school level?

To the best of your knowledge, how long has the district offered these special education programs and services?

Could you please indicate if any of these programs are considered self-contained? This means that the students receive the majority of their academic teaching in a special education class.

Is there a set criteria that is in writing for placing a child in a specific program or service?

**The following questions are related to high school.**

What do your special education programs and services does your district offer at the high school?

To the best of your knowledge, how long has the district offered these special education programs and services?

Could you please indicate if any of these programs are considered self-contained? This means that the students receive the majority of their academic teaching in a special education class.

Is there a set criteria that is in writing for placing a child in a specific program or service?

**The following questions are related to decision-making.**

When new federal mandates are set forth, what is the procedure the district follows to ensure the district is meeting these mandates?

How does the district go about determining what special education programs and services it will be offering?
When deciding what programs and services to offer, what methods do you use when making decisions? (If the interviewee is unsure of how to answer this question, provide them with these examples: data driven/evidence based, problem solving process, or site-based management.)

What is the process the district takes when creating a new special education program?

Who is involved in the decision making process to implement these programs?

In regards to special education decisions relating to programs and services, is your district more reactive or premeditated in its decisions on what to implement?

How does your district decide when to create a program in district rather than send students out of district?

How does your district evaluate the effectiveness of their programs?

What challenges does your district face with regards to special education?

Has your district given any thought to what the future of special education will look like in your district?

Follow up: In what way has your district started to plan for what special education will look like in your district in the future?

**The following questions relate to special education.**

What resources does your district have? (staffing, services, equipment, supplies)

What resources is your district lacking?

What do you want to do with regards to special education, but are not able to?

Why are you not able to do that?

**Concluding Statement:** Thank you for your time today and your assistance with helping me collect data for my research. Once I have translated the interview, analyzed the data, and made my conclusions, you will have the opportunity to view a rough draft of my conclusions to help ensure I have not misinterpreted or misunderstood the meaning of your responses during the interview. If that is something you are interested in, I can contact you when I am at that part of the process.
Appendix B

Participant Informed Consent Form

Investigator Name: Christopher Unger, Ed. D.; Lauren M. Butters
Title of Project: District Decision Making Regarding Special Education: Responses from Three Districts

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to participate because in your job position you make special education decisions for your district and you expressed an initial interest in participating from a request letter that was sent July 2013.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to investigate how school districts respond to government mandates, how school district administration involved with special education perceive their district’s special education policies, services, programs, and resources, and how the district makes decisions regarding their programmatic offerings in special education.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, the researcher is asking you to be interviewed.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
Individual interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview will take place in a location of your choosing at a time that is mutually convenient for the participant and researcher.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
Participants will benefit by having the opportunity to reflect on the factors that are involved in their district’s special education programs and decision making policies. Their participation in this study could potentially benefit the participant’s school district and other school districts with their special education and decision making.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will not be confidential. Your name will be used in the final thesis.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
Participation in the study is voluntary. You are not required to take part. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any questions during the interview. You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time without any penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind. Your participation or non-participation will not in any way affect other relationships (e.g., employer, school, etc.).

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
Lauren Butters      Christopher Unger, Ed. D.
Dedham Middle School      College of Professional Studies
70 Whiting Avenue      360 Huntington Avenue (BV 20)
Dedham, MA 02026      Northeastern University, Boston
Cell # (617) 617-605-0311      Cell # 857-272-8941
E-mail: cronin.la@husky.neu.edu      E-mail: c.unger@neu.edu

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel. 617-373-7570, e-mail: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. I understand that my name will be used in the final thesis.

____________________________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)

____________________________________     __________
Research Participant (Signature)     Date