



**Evaluation of the Modified Consent Decree Accountability Plan
2007–08 and 2008–09 (July–February)**

**Deborah F. Oliver, Ph.D.
Rina Hoffer, M.A.**

**Los Angeles Unified School District
Research and Planning
Publication No. 2009–07**

April 2009

Table of Contents

Summary.....	1
Overview	2
Methods.....	4
Key Findings	5
Conclusion.....	20

Summary

This report examines the implementation of the Modified Consent Decree (MCD) Accountability Plan based on data collected from a sample of eight principals and their directors of school services. Since the primary focus of this study was MCD Outcome 5, the reduction of suspensions, schools were chosen because they had high suspension rates for their students with disabilities. The data were drawn from both interviews among our sample and among the 2007–08 end-of-year personnel evaluations (Stulls) for all of the principals and directors of school services in the District.

The District overall has demonstrated improvement in 2008–09 in the reduction of suspensions. As of the January 2009 report, the District’s cumulative suspension rate for special education students did not exceed the MCD target of less than 8.6%. Their current suspension rate (3.5%) is lower than last year (4.1%), indicating improvement and progress towards meeting the outcome this year. Moreover, among the eight sample schools included in this study, five demonstrated a reduced suspension rate compared to the previous year.

Additionally, the data reveal:

- All of the schools communicated that they focused on the reduction of suspensions in 2007–08 and 2008–09.
- Directors and principals discussed having access to and using data, receiving support, meeting regularly, and finding new intervention strategies as beneficial in assisting them to reduce suspensions.
- The topic of the MCD and special education was mentioned more often among the director performance evaluations (Stulls) with their principals (61%) than it was among their own end-of-year evaluations (29%).

As the District faces a budget deficit and staffing reductions, local districts will need to ensure that all schools continue to receive support as well as access to data, training, and personnel in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Overview

In 2003 the Modified Consent Decree (MCD) was established to meet the needs of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) students with disabilities. It differs from the original Chanda Smith Consent Decree, as it includes 19 specific quantifiable outcomes that the District must meet in order to disengage from the Decree. The Office of the Independent Monitor (OIM) was established to determine the progress of the District towards meeting these outcomes.

As part of this process, the Division of Special Education (the Division) is required to provide plans (MCD Accountability Plan) and strategies (Targeted Strategy Plan) to help the District meet these outcomes. The Division developed both an overall MCD Accountability Plan and a Targeted Strategy Plan (TSP) for each of the unmet outcomes, detailing the specific interventions that should be used to achieve the outcome. The MCD Accountability Plan identifies responsible staff at the central, local district, and school level to ensure accountability for meeting the unmet MCD outcomes. According to this plan, "local district superintendents and directors must employ targeted accountability as a strategy for ensuring implementation of the Targeted Strategy Plans at targeted schools." The most recent MCD Accountability Plan was approved by the Independent Monitor on May 15, 2008 and was to be implemented in the remainder of the 2007–08 school year and in 2008–09. Although targeted strategies were approved in August 2006, the most recent amendments to the targeted strategies were approved in January 2009.

The OIM requested that the Research and Planning Division conduct a study of the implementation of the MCD Accountability Plan with an emphasis on Outcome 5, the reduction of suspensions for students with disabilities. The OIM specifically requested that we interview eight principals and their directors of school services (the directors), one from each local district, to provide a snapshot of what is occurring in each local district. Although other school staff members may have more direct experience with special education, the principal is ultimately responsible for everything that occurs at the school. The principal sets the goals and priorities of the school, and should be aware of the goals and progress of each staff member.

The OIM also requested that we review all of the principal Stulls in the District for evidence of the MCD as a means to indicate the importance or value placed on the MCD in their assessment of performance.

The MCD Outcome 5 goal states the District must reduce the overall percentage of suspensions of students with disabilities to a rate lower than 8.6%. Suspension data comes directly from the schools as it is entered by school personnel into the Student Information System (SIS). The cumulative rate is calculated by dividing the number of suspended students (each time a child is suspended it counts as one) by the number of students. This percentage is calculated eight times a year for a report that is distributed to local districts and schools. In past years, the District has not met this outcome, although it is progressing towards the goal with 10.28% in 2006–07 and 8.95% in 2007–08. As of the January 2009 report, the suspension rate was 3.5%. At the same time last year, the suspension rate was 4.1%, indicating improvement and progress towards meeting the outcome in the current year.

The District identified a comprehensive approach to reduce suspensions. The approach entailed: 1) reducing the number of behavior problems and 2) finding alternatives to suspension. The overarching approach is captured in the Discipline Foundation Policy: School-Wide Positive Behavior Support, adopted in February of 2007. This policy sets specific guidelines at the school, local district, and central levels for all students and staff in the District. The purpose of this policy is to foster a positive school climate and culture conducive to learning. The policy reflected an approach to lowering suspensions through the development of proactive strategies to prevent discipline problems. Aligned with this policy, the Division of Special Education developed specific strategies to help reduce suspensions for students with disabilities and to offer alternatives to suspension. As the most recent amendments to these strategies were approved recently, they are not included in the interview portion of this study.

This Research and Planning Division report examines the extent to which the MCD Accountability Plan has been implemented, with an emphasis on Outcome 5. The following two research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent was special education mentioned on the 2007–08 end-of-year performance evaluations, i.e., Stull evaluations?
2. To what extent did directors and principals indicate that they engaged in efforts as specified in the MCD Accountability Plan to achieve the outcomes?

Methods

In order to examine these questions, we conducted two separate analyses: 1) an examination of the written comments on the Stull evaluations for all directors of school support and principals who were evaluated during 2007–08, and 2) interviews from a sample of eight principals and their directors, one from each of the local districts.¹

Each dimension of the Stull evaluation (communication, decision-making, management, interpersonal, and personal), as well as the overall commendations, recommendations, and assistance sections, were analyzed for occurrences of the following words or phrases associated with the Modified Consent Decree: MCD, Modified Consent Decree, outcome(s), disabilities, IEP, Welligent, and special education. Suspension(s) was added for directors and a subset of principals whose schools did not meet Outcome 5 last year.

Schools and principals were to be chosen for the interviews based on the following criteria:

- Their school must be on the OIM’s list of top suspenders of special education students for two years including 2007–08;
- The school must have had the same principal in 2007–08 and 2008–09;

¹ We had intended to also analyze the local district superintendent Stulls but local district superintendents were not evaluated in 2007–08. According to the Associated Administrators of Los Angeles (AALA) contract, certificated employees must be evaluated at least once during each of the first two school years of service within a class and at least every other year thereafter; however, if a staff member has been with the District for at least 10 years and has had continuous status in class then their evaluation period may be extended beyond 2 years.

- The principal must have had a Stull for 2007–08;
- The school must have had the same director in 2007–08 and 2008–09; and
- The director must have had a Stull for 2007–08.

However, there were several local districts with no schools that met these criteria. Thus, we revised the criteria. Since directors did not have to have a 2007–08 Stull and few actually were evaluated, this criterion was eliminated. Also, the school did not have to be on the OIM list in 2007–08; however, their suspension rate had to be close to the cut-off to be placed on the list, the rate of suspensions had to be above the MCD goal, and the school had to be on the 2006–07 and 2005–06 lists. Even with these changes there was one local district with no schools that met all of our criteria. However, all of the schools in the sample exceeded the 2007–08 MCD goal (13% to 25%).

The interviews focused primarily on Outcome 5 and the strategies adopted by the school(s) to reduce suspensions and implement the MCD Accountability Plan. Interviews were conducted face-to-face during the end of January and the beginning of February 2009. The questions were open-ended with prompts to guide the conversation.

Key Findings

Was special education discussed at the 2007-08 directors' Stulls?

This question was addressed in two ways: 1) a review of the actual Stulls of all of the directors and 2) interview questions asked directly to the eight directors. Only 17 of the directors were evaluated at the end of 2007–08. Unfortunately, four of the local districts did not have performance evaluations for any of their directors and not all directors were evaluated in the four that did have evaluations. Stulls were conducted from May to July 2008, but primarily in July after the school year was completed. Of the 17 directors who were evaluated, only 5 Stulls mentioned anything having to do with the MCD and special education (29%). Although the MCD was mentioned, Outcome 5 was not. Most of the comments were positive comments on the MCD in general. Below are the comments and the dimension of the Stull where the comment was located:

- *The Director continues to grow and develop as a Director and is highly effective in guiding her schools and monitoring the implementation and support of the District instructional initiatives and MCD compliance. (Commendation)*
- *The Director worked closely with the planning of Assistant Principal meetings to facilitate Special Education panel discussions with the focus on meeting the MCD benchmarks. (Commendation)*
- *The Director monitored and worked closely with the Principals to ensure that the schools met the MCD benchmarks. (Commendation)*
- *Continue to focus on improving MCD compliance at targeted schools and monitor compliance monthly with site administrators. Continue to direct school administrators regarding the expectation and accountability for the achievement of the MCD Outcomes by June 30, 2008. (Recommendation)*
- *Supporting schools to meet MCD and CRRE goals and implementation, is dependent on careful planning and organization and follow up. (Management Dimension).*

Among the three directors interviewed who had a 2007–08 Stull, we found no reference to the MCD or special education; however, two of those directors mentioned that the MCD was addressed at their Stull. One director specifically mentioned that the reduction of suspensions was discussed. This may suggest that not all conversations were included in a formal written evaluation.

Was special education discussed in the 2007-08 principals' Stulls?

As with the directors, we reviewed the actual Stulls and asked the principals what was discussed at their Stulls. We also interviewed the directors as to their recollection of what was discussed at the principals' Stulls. Stulls were requested for all principals in the District. There were 388

principal Stulls conducted in 2007–08 from April 29 to July 8, 2008. The MCD or special education was mentioned on 235 Stulls (61%). Table 1 below indicates in what section the comment was found. The table specifies if the comment was about the MCD or special education in general.

Table 1
Number of Special Education and MCD Comments on the Principal Stulls

Stull Area	MCD/Outcome	Special Education	Total
Communication	4	1	5
Decision Making	11	8	19
Management	39	5	44
Interpersonal	17	7	24
Personnel	3	5	8
Overall: Commendations	68	4	72
Overall: Recommendations	103	10	113
Overall: Assistance	22	0	22

Under commendations, 68 of the principals were told that they were doing a good job on meeting the MCD outcomes or on a specific outcome. Most of the commendations (48) mentioned that the school/principal had met a certain outcome or all of the outcomes. Under recommendations, 103 mentioned the MCD or a specific outcome. Outcomes 2, academic achievement, and Outcome 10, the timely completion of IEPs, were mentioned the most frequently, followed by Outcome 5. All of the 22 comments under assistance referred to the MCD, mentioning one or more outcomes. Nine of the comments mentioned Outcome 10, six mentioned Outcome 5, and six mentioned Outcome 2.

We specifically looked at the top 50 suspending schools according to the OIM from 2007–08 to see if the MCD and specifically suspensions were mentioned on their Stulls. Of the 50 principals on the list, 23 were evaluated in 2007–08. Nothing was mentioned under the communication, interpersonal, or personal dimensions. Under decision making there was one comment on the MCD but it did not include Outcome 5. Under management there was a general comment about positive student behaviors. There was one comment under commendation regarding Outcomes

1, 2, 7, and 10 and one assistance comment about meeting MCD outcome goals. The most comments were under recommendations where five mentioned monitoring progress towards meeting the MCD outcomes. Three specifically mentioned Outcome 5 and three mentioned discipline and behavior but not specifically special education students. The three comments on Outcome 5 (two were identical) were as follows:

- *Data analysis indicates that the school made progress on outcomes 6, 7, 10, 13, and 17 of the MCD; however, a plan to address outcome 5 (reduce suspensions) must be developed and implemented for the 08–09 school year. (two comments)*
- *Continue to communicate with parents in a timely manner. Continue to strengthen the implementation of the schoolwide behavior plan as a means to reducing student suspensions (Outcome 5) and increasing instructional time.*

Half (4) of the principals we interviewed mentioned that the MCD was addressed at their own Stull evaluation. One reflected that it was not explicitly addressed whereas three of the principals could not recall whether the MCD outcomes were included at their own Stull evaluation with the director. One principal mentioned that the director had told him/her that the MCD would be addressed at the Stull but it wasn't. Another mentioned that the Stull was not that specific. When we asked the directors if it was included in the Stulls of these eight principals, five said it was addressed; however, almost all of the directors indicated that they were given instructions to include it on the Stulls. One indicated that there was a recommendation given and two mentioned discussing the following:

- *Ensure IEP process is up to date, provide PD for staff, and a reminder to reduce suspensions*
- *Overall improvement in suspensions and upward movement of achievement*

Differences in the recollections of the directors and principals were probably a function of the Stulls being conducted over six months ago.

Was special education discussed at the 2007-08 assistant principals' Stulls?

The MCD Accountability Plan states that the MCD should be included in the assistant principal (AP) in charge of special education as well as the principals' Stulls. Thus, the principals were asked if they discussed the MCD while conducting the Stull of their AP in charge of special education. In four of the schools, the AP in charge of special education was not evaluated at the end of the 2007-08 school year as they were not returning to the position in the following year. Most of the other principals confirmed that an explicit conversation occurred regarding the MCD outcomes. One mentioned that there was a big focus on the MCD from the District and the local district, and therefore when he/she sat down with the AP to conduct the Stull, it was on the agenda. We did not review their Stulls so no independent confirmation is possible.

Did the superintendent and chief executive over special education meet with the local district superintendents to review the accountability process?

The MCD Accountability Plan states that this meeting should occur twice during the school year. The Division was asked to provide us with dates for these meetings. In 2007-08, Donnalyn Jaque-Antón, the chief executive over special education, was a member of the Superintendent's Cabinet and the MCD was regularly on the agenda (30 times from July to June). In 2008-09, she was not a member of the Superintendent's Leadership Council and did not discuss the MCD accountability responsibilities with them until March 2008-09. We did not go further to see if it was discussed at the meetings by the Superintendent or the Chief Academic Officer.

Were the principals focused on the MCD?

During their interviews, seven of the directors stated that their principals were very focused on the MCD. During their interviews, these seven principals were able to discuss the MCD and what their school was doing to address the outcomes. In only one school did the director indicate that the MCD was not a primary focus of the principal; however, this principal had limited

tenure in the position and indicated that the responsibilities for the MCD were delegated to the assistant principal.

What outcomes did the schools focus on last year and this year?

According to the directors, all of the schools focused on reducing suspensions in 2007–08 and in 2008–09. Other outcomes mentioned were increasing qualified teachers, improving parent participation, ensuring timely IEPs, augmenting time in general education classes, improving student learning, improving record keeping, increasing graduation rates, reducing opportunity transfers, and creating learning centers.

According to the principals, the schools focused a significant amount of attention and effort on reducing suspensions. They also mentioned focusing on mainstreaming students, improving academics, completing IEPs, hiring qualified teachers, and increasing parent participation.

What steps were taken to reduce suspension?

The directors mentioned a variety of ways that they were working with their principals to reduce suspensions. Three specifically mentioned working with their principal to change the culture or climate at the school. Two specifically mentioned that the schools had special education staffing problems but that these problems had been addressed. Others mentioned professional development, including the on-line program, and receiving support from internal and external sources. They also mentioned their implementation of positive behavior supports and alternatives to suspensions.

For the most part, principals indicated that they continued to concentrate on the same strategies from the previous year because the strategies were beginning to demonstrate impact.

In order to address Outcome 5, schools adopted some of the following strategies:

- Improved internal communication systems among counselors and deans and tracking referrals
- Providing professional development such as positive behavior support training

- Creating cross disciplinary teaming of teachers to develop referral alternatives
- Communicating with parents in the form of phone calls, personal contact, monthly meetings, and workshops
- Conducting regular discipline assemblies for students
- Developing rewards programs for students
- Providing resource centers fostering partnerships with law enforcement and community-based organizations
- Enhancing coordination among school based programs and services
- Strengthening the capacity and the responsibilities of the staff at the school site
- Developing partnerships with other schools to pool and share resources and strategies
- Enhancing the data systems and access to reports within the school for tracking, referrals, attendance, tardiness, detentions and suspensions
- Involving students in developing conduct policies and intervention strategies
- Developing systems to ensure that teachers have time to meet together on a regular basis to plan and problem solve
- Reviewing SIS data and developing plans based on the data
- Using a progressive discipline policy
- Conveying universal rules to everyone
- Having a behavior intervention classroom where students bring their work and get counseling
- Requiring student uniforms; if a student fails to wear one the school loans them one for the day
- Ensuring special school programs like peer counseling

- Providing alternatives such as campus beautification and tutoring in lieu of suspension
- Separating lunch periods in the middle school

The principals mentioned that finding and developing alternative strategies to suspension posed some additional staffing challenges. More specifically, some stated that they had problems creating intervention classrooms to service students on an “on call” basis when a discipline issue should arise because of limited staff. Some principals found that they didn’t have enough strategies at their fingertips and wanted additional and differentiated professional development, beyond how to use the Welligent system, or an introductory training in positive behavior support.

Overall, the strategies adopted in this sample of schools appear to have contributed to a reduction in percentage of suspensions of special education students as of January 2009. Thus far, 50% are below the MCD benchmark and 63% are below where they were last year (see Table 2). As all principals indicated, new systems and procedures have been implemented in the current year and these efforts are still evolving.

Table 2
Change in Sample Schools Special Education Students Suspension Rate

Schools	Suspensions for Special Education Students (January 2008)	Suspensions for Special Education Students (January 2009)
A	8%	5%
B	11%	18%
C	7%	8%
D	10%	9%
E	6%	4%
F	9%	8%
G	17%	16%
H	9%	16%

In order to maintain anonymity, the numbers have been rounded.

What support was offered to the schools?

Support was offered to the schools from both the local districts and the support units. Local district support came primarily from each principal's director. Principals characterized the directors' primary role as broker between the school and the support unit, whenever necessary, and as negotiator or facilitator of partnerships with external agencies or across schools. Directors offered guidance by visiting schools, providing professional development, and negotiating support. In one instance, a principal reflected on how the director was instrumental in diagnosing and resolving the problem of "out of compliance IEPs" by bringing in a team from other schools to assist in "catching up." Principals, for the most part, indicated that they valued the support and involvement of the director in the administration of the school and appreciated their presence at meetings, and their role in providing the needed assistance. They used terms such as "supportive," "tremendous," and "invaluable." On the other hand, one principal felt that the director could have also provided constructive feedback and recognition, rather than solely critique and directives. Only one principal indicated that he/she had sufficient school site capacity and external support was not necessary.

As the following examples illustrate, the directors were fairly involved:

- *We talk every week at least once. He's through my door at least once a month. We have two professional developments. We have our learning communities, overall general meeting. He attended all our safety collaborative meetings with us. He also helped set up professional development for our deans and counselors about working with students and special education, and students with learning disabilities, and behavioral modification. He set up two PD's to address the suspensions.*
- *He's always at my weekly administrative team meetings. He comes with his yellow highlighter and shares with us his findings. We have the perfect research-based director. He asks probing questions. I really appreciate it.*

One director mentioned sharing best practices and helping principals to communicate with other schools.

- *A lot of our discussions focus on best practices. The principal is very open to listening to suggestions and what's happening at other schools. So I might help her to communicate with those other principals. Sometimes in our principals' meetings, we do best practices share-arounds. In our complex meetings we would share with each other some of their strategies. Brainstorming and facilitating networking with others outside the school. It's a lot of problem solving. We depend on people to do compliant activities.*

Several principals mentioned the sharing of ideas with other principals and directors on alternatives to suspensions as being helpful. This example illustrates a concerted collaborative effort in one local district:

- *We have a learning community of principals with our directors. We have been doing this for at least the last two years. It's the fourth Thursday of every month. We focus on different topics. We talk about special education almost every time. We talk about implementing the EL plan. These meetings are facilitated by the directors. It's a really big deal.*

Additional support was provided by the support units. Although not asked directly about the degree of support provided by the support units, principals often provided their reviews. There were mixed comments about the support units. Some principals indicated that the support they received specific to the MCD more often came directly from the support units, whereas other principals felt their directors' were much more available and accessible than the support units. Some felt the support units could be more responsive to their needs whereas others were concerned about how they could get their needs met without them. As the support units each serve two local districts and are not under the supervision of the local district superintendents,

some principals felt that some of the support units were not responsive in meeting their needs in a timely fashion.

Although principals indicated that off-site professional development opportunities were available to teachers, and representatives from the support unit occasionally came to the schools to provide support and offer strategies, they continued to need additional assistance. While the directors were instrumental in negotiating partnerships with external support services or in finding help for a particular problem, principals indicated that they needed to have the capacity to be proactive in seeking out the support available.

Did they receive instructions for language to use at the Initial Planning Conferences?

At the beginning of the school year, each staff member being evaluated and his/her administrator (e.g., director and principal) must complete an Initial Planning Sheet and have an Initial Planning Conference. At this conference, staff members are supposed to determine the criteria to be used in the final evaluation. Throughout the year, the administrators are supposed to observe the employees and provide feedback. If there is a need for improvement they are supposed to counsel the employees and make written recommendations. According to the MCD Accountability Plan, the Division is supposed to supply staff with sample language on the MCD to use on this sheet for performance evaluation. In July 2007 and in May 2008, the Division supplied language to use on the initial planning forms. When interviewed, all eight of the directors mentioned receiving this information.

According to the 17 directors' Stulls, they all had an Initial Planning Conference between July 20 and September 18, 2007. According to the 388 principals' Stulls, almost all had an Initial Planning Conference between July to December 2007. In 22 cases we were unable to determine when it occurred as the date was missing or appeared to be incorrect.

Did the directors and principals have conferences to discuss the MCD?

The MCD Accountability Plan stresses the need for conferences between the directors and principals to discuss the school's MCD performance. Specific benchmarks are to be set for unmet outcomes. Although all of the directors indicated that they were meeting with principals or visiting schools on a regular basis only one director was able to show written evidence of having conferences with the principal; however, all of the principals corroborated having these meetings. Rather than formal conversations, principals indicated that conversations around the MCD occurred on a regular basis at monthly principal meetings, at other meetings, and at the school sites. Although the MCD Accountability Plan indicates that a conference should take place within the first six weeks of the school year, only three of the directors specifically indicated that they had a conference with the principals during the first six weeks of 2008–09. Two of those directors specifically mentioned using the Initial Planning Sheet. The MCD Accountability Plan states that they are to set benchmarks at these conferences and if benchmarks are not met the director will take action to hold the principal accountable. When asked about this process one said that the MCD goal was the benchmark, another said that the principal set his/her own benchmarks, and one said that they set goals together. When asked if they gave out formal or informal warnings if benchmarks/goals were not met, the directors indicated that they did not take this type of action. The directors indicated that the rapport they had with their principals was not evaluative but rather supportive, enabling principals to feel comfortable and request support when necessary.

Did the directors and principals receive and use data?

The MCD Accountability Plan stated that the Division of Special Education will publish and distribute regular reports on MCD data. Principals were asked how they monitor the impact of their implementation strategies on the MCD outcomes. They reported receiving monthly or bi-monthly reports at their local district principals' meetings. In some instances these reports were also provided to the assistant principals at their separate meetings. Two of the principals

indicated that they received this data irregularly and one said that he/she received it quarterly. Several mentioned that they also access data using the School Information System (SIS).

A few principals mentioned that in the previous year more time was devoted to analyzing the data and discussing strategies, whereas in the current year, the data have typically been provided as a distribution in packets, with limited discussion. Some principals indicated that fewer presentations from the support units occurred in the 2008–09 school year. Only a few principals mentioned opportunities in the current year to discuss best practices across schools facilitated by their directors. Some of the principals did not mention engaging during their monthly meetings with their directors regarding the MCD progress reports. Conversations occurred periodically when incidents rose to the attention of the director.

As this excerpt from a director interview illustrates, clearly the data were made available.

- *We get monthly reports from the support unit. We give those to the principals at meetings and review it informally and formally. We look at progress reports and at the attendance and suspension data. A week later we give information to the APs at their meeting. There is a full hour on special education – MCD reports, attendance, and suspensions. AP meetings are three hours long and one hour is on special education.*

While we found evidence that data were distributed, we did not receive a clear picture as to how principals reviewed the data with their staff. Some principals reported having limited opportunities for reporting the data to the school staff. Typically, these data were only shared with the administrative staff charged with special education as a means to gauge progress. Furthermore, principals indicated they typically relied on others to generate the reports; however, some principals also indicated that they generated their own disaggregated reports. Therefore, the schools' ability to reflect on and analyze the effectiveness of strategies may have been hampered by: 1) limited access to data reports generated externally, 2) limited opportunities to collaboratively interpret the data, and 3) a lack of disaggregated data, allowing

them to differentiate between students and among teachers and identify trends or issues within classes.

Was the local district superintendent supportive?

All of the directors but one felt that the local district superintendent was very supportive. They offered materials, help from the support unit, and discussed special education at meetings.

What additional support is needed?

Directors and principals were asked if there was anything the Division of Special Education or the local district superintendent could do to assist them further. Directors offered mixed suggestions regarding the support units: continue support from support unit, add more people to the support unit, and eliminate the support unit and put it in the local district. One director mentioned that the outcomes were unrealistic and keep changing and another suggested re-norming clerical support in relationship to active IEPs. The principals mentioned a need for continued support and strategies to provide a positive learning environment.

Principals also stressed the need for an experienced and stable staff. Principals expressed having a high degree of staffing challenges and turnover in special education. Four principals mentioned having a newly assigned individual into the role of AP in charge of special education with less than a year experience in that role. Overall, acquiring the appropriate staffing to address special education and behavioral issues in general has been a challenge for most schools. For the most part, the principals have delegated responsibility to an assistant principal or a team of individuals, including counselors and deans. In the high schools, the division of labor and distribution of responsibilities was dispersed among a greater number of individuals compared to middle schools. Most principals mentioned that the key to their success in addressing the outcomes set forth in the MCD has been developing a coordinated team of individuals capable of working in coordination with the local districts and the support units. Several of the schools also mentioned the support from the Bridge coordinator. Those schools assigned a site-based Bridge coordinator found the assistance invaluable, primarily due to their dedicated attention to the monitoring and implementation of the MCD.

What strategies did the Division of Special Education implement during 2008-09?

The Outcome 5 Targeted Strategy Plan amendments were approved by the OIM in January 2009. Several of the amendments had specific action steps for January and February of 2009. The Division of Special Education provided us with information regarding some of these activities.

- *The online professional development on best practices in suspension alternatives and ethical discipline is available to staff on the Learning Zone. As of March 9, 2009, 89 people had completed this class. Principals and school staff continue to participate in the training. As of the beginning of April 2009, 400 people had enrolled in the class.*
- *The professional development in classroom management and behavior management is being conducted by behavior specialists. School staff continues to be trained.*
- *Behavior specialists continue to identify students with the highest likelihood of being suspended in sixth and ninth grade at targeted schools. School site teams are being established to provide interventions.*
- *Quarterly suspension data has been provided to local district staff and targeted school principals for analysis.*
- *Behavior specialists have been allocated to targeted schools to provide varying levels of support, including professional development, on-campus support, and data analysis with school staff. These activities have positively influenced these schools in the area of finding alternatives to suspension. Activity logs are reviewed in a collaborative team format to generate discussion.*
- *Behavior specialists are working with schools on how to analyze their disciplinary practices. The data analysis reports and the Commitment to Action forms are ongoing.*
- *Local district superintendents received a written communication explaining the new procedures for principals to follow before the act of suspending a student with disabilities for a non-mandatory reason can even be considered.*
- *The directors are in various stages of completing the Rubric for Implementation Training online and should now be beginning to use the Rubric with the targeted schools.*

Did the schools use the behavior specialists?

As stated in the Targeted Strategy Plan for Outcome 5, a secondary behavior specialist would work with targeted schools and other schools with high suspension rates. Principals' comments are reflected below:

- *We met with her in the fall, and discussed the problems with our suspensions and they went through our suspensions and the dean's comments. She met with my AP in charge of discipline, and they came up with a plan. We were given 10 hours a month. I think that's when they started planning professional development and provided alternatives to suspensions.*
- *She comes on campus and works with teachers to help – strategies to deal with difficult students to not suspend them (works one to one). She comes as needed and to the meeting tomorrow. This is part of assistance and guidance for teachers to reduce their own personal suspension rates.*
- *The behavior specialist just tells us to implement supportive discipline. They sometimes do trainings or go in the classrooms.*
- *There is a behavior specialist assigned. They come from support unit. They are not here very often.*

All principals with the exception of one indicated that they have access to a behavior specialist provided by the support units for assistance and site-based professional development.

However, comments were mixed as to what they are doing.

Conclusion

The MCD and, specifically, Outcome 5 were areas of focus at the local districts and at the schools in both 2007–08 and 2008–09. During this time steps have been taken by the local district superintendents and directors of school services to offer support and guidance. In addition, the Division of Special Education offered support through staff, professional development, and bulletins. The local district superintendents discussed the MCD at meetings with their staff; directors worked with principals; and principals worked with their staff at the

school site. Most schools received data on a regular basis and used their data to make decisions and plans. As principals indicated, new systems and procedures have been implemented in the current year.

The directors, for the most part, are working diligently with their principals to help students with disabilities and meet the unmet outcomes. According to most principals, this guidance and support has been helpful in reducing suspensions.

Principals need to continue to adopt coordinated efforts with their school staff and local district and support unit staff to systematically reduce suspensions and provide the instructional and behavioral supports needed by students with disabilities. In order to further assist in this coordinated effort, schools will need greater access to their own data, and training on monitoring and tracking the effectiveness of their strategies. The central office can assist in this effort by ensuring that data systems are in place at the schools sites, and that appropriate assistance is available to schools to ensure the usefulness of the data in determining next steps. Schools will also need to continue to improve their capacity to monitor their own effectiveness once the District has been disengaged from the Consent Decree.

According to the MCD Accountability Plan, the MCD should be included in the end-of-year performance evaluations (Stulls). Less than a third (29%) of the director evaluations mentioned the MCD or special education; however, a large percentage of principal Stulls (61%) mentioned the MCD or special education. Many of the comments were in the commendation section and congratulated the principal on meeting all or some of the MCD outcomes. Specific steps to reduce suspensions were seldom mentioned.

As of the January 2009 report, the District's cumulative suspension rate for students with disabilities was below what it was last year (3.5% versus 4.1%). As they were close to meeting the outcome last year (8.95% versus 8.60%), they are on a path to meet it this year. Among the eight sample schools in the study, five showed a reduced suspension rate thus far as compared to last year but only four are below 8.6%.

Limitations of the Study

Since the local district superintendents were not evaluated in 2007–08, this limited our ability to determine what direction they received from the Superintendent. Furthermore, the small number of director Stulls limited our ability to determine what direction the directors received from their local district superintendents.

The interview portion of this study involves only eight principals and eight directors. Because of the small sample we can not generalize this information to other schools; however, it does give us an idea of what is occurring in each local district.

In order to deliver this report to the Division of Special Education before the next MCD Accountability Plan is developed, we asked questions in the middle of the school year. Over the next few months, the Division and the local districts will take additional steps to help schools reduce the number of suspensions. This will not be covered by this report.

This study does not evaluate the effectiveness of any of the steps taken by any of the schools to reduce suspensions. Whether the District or individual schools meet the outcome will not be known until the end of the school year.

Recommendations and Action Steps

- Since the MCD Accountability Plan is intended for all role groups, the local district superintendents and directors should be evaluated on a yearly basis until the MCD outcomes are met. Evaluating all of the principals every year is not practical due to the large numbers but those who continue to not meet the outcomes or show progress should be evaluated yearly.
- Although the MCD does impact all dimensions of the Stull, there is no section that addresses the MCD directly. A section should be added to the Stull that directly addresses meeting the needs of various groups. This section should not just focus on students with disabilities but other groups of students in need such as English learners.

Staff evaluations should be based on the extent to which the school has shown considerable progress in meeting the social and academic needs of the students. If this cannot be formally added to the Stull it could be added as supplemental information that could be between the director and the principal to help guide practice.

- High staff turnover has been a problem in the past and due to the budget cuts may be a bigger problem this year. It is important that directors and principals keep detailed reports on steps taken and progress towards meeting unmet outcomes. This was also mentioned in the last report on the MCD Accountability Plan. Only one director was able to provide notes from conferences with principals. Historical records would facilitate more coordinated and systematic progress and cut down on disruptions to support. These records should start immediately before the end of the school year.
- In order to facilitate more effective monitoring of support, the Division should develop a protocol for use in the director and principal meetings for documentation and logging purposes. This protocol could consist of a specific process in order to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement (e.g., when it occurred, who was there, what was discussed, what progress was made, and what future action steps should be taken).
- It is important that personnel at the schools sites have the capacity to access their own data. Once we become disengaged from the MCD, schools must continue to monitor their data. Procedures must be put in place for data access. School staff must be trained on not only how to access data, but also how to use it. Schools need to systematically monitor progress and enhance their capacity to generate and analyze the impact of implementation strategies. Schools need the capacity to generate disaggregated reports regularly in order to evaluate, monitor, support and communicate the effectiveness of specific strategies or instructional practices for individual teachers and students.

- Schools need continued opportunities to coordinate all of their staff and support services to meet the needs of their students. They need time to review the data together, reflect on their effectiveness, and coordinate support.