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WVDE Office of Special Education's Response to the WV Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Students 2023 Report

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Office of Special Education (OSE) acknowledges the existence of significant challenges that West Virginia (WV) local educational agencies (LEA) encounter while striving to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities (SWD). These challenges vary based on each disability category and the unique needs of each student. The WVDE/OSE plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges through shaping policies, allocating resources, providing professional learning and technical assistance, ensuring accountability, and its commitment to the implementation of all general supervision responsibilities specified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and West Virginia Policy 2419: Regulations for the Education of Students with Exceptionalities. The work of the OSE focuses on continuous improvement in all areas of special education compliance and results and improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

In alignment with the WVDE's efforts toward a statewide education system that equips all students to graduate high school and be prepared for success in college or their chosen careers, West Virginia's state systemic improvement plan (SSIP), "*Guideposts to Graduation*," focuses on closing the gap in graduation rate between all students and the students with disabilities subgroup. Guideposts to Graduation offers resources for students, educators, and families. These resources and services include a community of practice made up of LEA staff, state educational agency (SEA) staff and stakeholders from around the state who collaborate and brainstorm new ways to positively impact student outcomes, provides grant funding to offer services that lead students toward productive adult outcomes, supports LEAs in providing evidence-based practices, and much more. During the 2023-2024 school year, in response to the 2023 report developed by the West Virginia Advisory Council for the Education of Exceptional Children (WVACEEC) at the end of the previous school year, the OSE provided multiple training sessions to LEAs and a culminating end of year collaborative transition conference to bring together families and resources, including but not limited to, state and private agencies, work programs, and LEA and SEA staff. This event addressed secondary transition service needs and assisted in building much-needed relationships and a communication system between LEAs, agencies, and families.

In addition to secondary transition, the WVDE OSE offers a wide range of other free professional development opportunities for LEA directors, teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals that focus on topics such as standards-based IEP development, inclusive practices, specially designed instruction, behavior management, compliance, disciplinary practices for SWD, parent involvement, and PreK services. In addition, through collaboration with the West Virginia Department of Human Services

(DoHS), WVDE ensures that students with disabilities in out-of-state treatment facilities receive appropriate educational services. The various ways monitoring for compliance and improved results is implemented by the OSE, as well as the training efforts discussed, underscore the WVDE/OSE staff's commitment to supporting SWD and fostering an inclusive learning environment. At the start of the 2023-2024 school year, the OSE introduced an automated system through which LEAs can request professional learning and technical assistance. This system has been utilized to request in-person and virtual training opportunities on various topics throughout the school year and beyond. In addition, complete courses on topics including co-teaching, dyslexia, dyscalculia, behavior, exceptionalities, and others are available through the Canvas platform and managed by the WVDE. This option allows for flexible self-paced coursework, rather than a quick sit-and-get option, and aims to change practices through careful contemplation of material and guidance.

The WVDE/OSE is making significant strides in enhancing educational practices through its grants to LEAs. These grants support various improvement initiatives, ensuring that educators are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of students. Given the turnover and shortage of fully certified special educators, the OSE has also implemented boot camps for new and uncertified teachers during the 23-24 school year, focusing on basic skills and topics needed to successfully provide special education services and navigate compliance and behavioral challenges. These sessions have been held outside of the school day and compensation has been provided to teachers for their time and effort. The boot camps have been very successful, with strong positive feedback and the desire for the continuation of the project. The WVDE/OSE also addresses shortages in related service areas through tuition assistance grants for speech-language pathology and speech-language pathology assistant students who complete specific programs at WVU and Marshall University and agree to work in WV public schools after graduation. Retaining experienced teachers and related service staff is crucial for maintaining and enhancing a quality educational system. The Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Visually Impaired teacher education preparation programs continue to be funded by the OSE to recruit and retain teachers in these low-incidence disability areas. To mitigate the possibility of adverse impacts on student learning due to high teacher turnover, the OSE will continue to offer training for all educators who support learning for SWD. For example, the WVDE also provides monthly professional development and support for all speech-language pathologists working in WV schools.

The West Virginia "Grow Your Own" Pathway to Teaching program, designed to address the state's critical need for teachers, began in the fall of 2022. Today, the program has grown to a total enrollment of 375 students with the following demographics:

- 83.6% of the students are female.
- 16.4% are male.
- 89.6% of the students identify as White, 10.4% are non-white, and 29.4% are first-generation collegegoers.

The Grow Your Own program involves 46 high schools or vocational centers in 35 active participating counties, including the WVSDB (West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind). Seven counties have also initiated their program. The number of Higher Education Institutions (IHEs) and Career and Technical Colleges (CTCs) participating in the program has increased to 11 IHEs (Institutes of Higher Education) and 5 CTCs (Career and Technical Colleges). Because of the WVDE's commitment, this program has

expanded. The WVACEEC hosted a Grow Your Own guest at a recent council meeting to learn more about this valuable program.

Mental health and classroom behavior concerns have risen to be one of the top challenges facing public education in WV. The WVDE has trained on the nuances of the WV multi-tiered system of support to address not only the academic needs of students but also the behavior and mental health needs that contribute to disruptions in classrooms throughout the state. WV school districts have access to several resources to assist in dealing with these concerns, and more initiatives are forthcoming:

- **The Office of Student Support & Well Being** administers a multitude of mental health services including the **Aware Grant** – A multi-tiered system of support where schools, families, and strategic community partners work together to enhance student mental health in schools.
- **The WV Behavior/Mental Health Technical Assistance Center (BMHTAC)** located at Marshall University and funded by the WVDE/OSE continues to provide PBIS training to schools. This center is staffed with behavior experts and support specialists located regionally throughout the state at both the early childhood and school-age programmatic levels. The BMHTAC hosted its annual conference in June 2024, bringing together hundreds of LEA staff and other individuals focused on improving student behavior in the state. Currently, the WVDE is working with the BMHTAC to explore the possibility of adding a coaching component for more hands-on assistance in schools for teachers and staff dealing with challenging behavior.
- **Cook Center for Human Development** - This is the newest resource WVDE has made possible through a three-year contract with this national nonprofit to make parenting sessions, question-answer forums, and regular 1:1 parent coaching with cognitive behavioral coaches available for all WV parents of school-age children and all WV educators and school staff. The program was introduced in May 2024, and training is underway throughout the state on how to access this service.
- **A Board-Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)** has been added to the WVDE OSE staff during the 2024-2025 school year. This individual assists school staff in dealing with challenging behaviors through professional learning, technical assistance, and face-to-face collaboration.
- **Teacher Professional Learning** (formally WVLearns) is available to all WV teachers through the WVDE Canvas platform. WV educators can learn through free online courses at their own pace. Various courses and resources are available for educators, paraprofessionals, and other LEA staff.
- **The WVDE Assessment Portal** is a hub that contains information for educators, parents, and students about the WV General Summative Assessment for Grades 3-8. Students and parents can practice test questions, review practice scoring guides, and hear test directions in various languages.
- School districts are revamping their **alternative education programs** to better meet the needs of students with challenging behaviors. Raleigh County Schools has featured its Tier 4 programs focused on addressing the most significant behaviors that cannot be corrected within the typical school environment. This program features evidence of prerequisite interventions and a transition plan must be in place for the student to return to their regular school from the onset of the placement. Intensive services and supports are available to address student behaviors. This program is available to students both with and without disabilities and has been replicated in a few additional LEAs.

In closing, the WVDE/OSE appreciates the WVACEEC and its commitment and partnership in ensuring that each of West Virginia's students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Together with the WVACEEC, the WVDE, our WV LEAs, and the many dedicated stakeholders throughout the state will continue to advocate and work toward improved compliance and positive outcomes for all students.