Title
Understanding How Independent High Schools Support Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Understanding How Independent High Schools Support Students on the Autism Spectrum

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

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2019
Understanding what independent schools do to support students with learning differences is critical given that they serve more than 580,000 students across the country and have no legal requirement to report their processes or outcomes. Over the last 15 years, overall enrollment in independent schools has been declining, while at the same time there has been an increase in the admission and retention of students in the fastest growing disability category, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Students with ASD demonstrate impairments in social communication skills, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviors. Co-occurring conditions—including anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and specific learning disabilities—can also affect school success for students with ASD. The current literature exposes a dearth of published research on the practices of independent schools in supporting students with ASD. This study aimed to address the questions: (a) How do independent high schools create, implement, and evaluate support plans for students on the autism spectrum and how are the supports and
strategies chosen? and (b) Are independent school personnel aware if their practices of support are based on current research?

Based on a review of the available literature, interview protocols were created to investigate the research questions as they pertain to administrators, learning specialists, teachers, and parents in independent high schools. Three schools were selected from the eight that agreed to participate from the greater Southern California region, representing three different models of student support. Analysis of the data collected suggest that, overall, administrators identify teachers as being responsible for implementing and evaluating learning plans. However, teachers typically report they are not aware that they are the responsible party and lack the professional training to carry out the designated task. Chosen support strategies are based on common practice, but are not rooted in current evidence or research. However, due to declining enrollment, some independent schools are admitting students that they are unprepared to support appropriately. If independent schools are going to continue to admit and retain students with diverse learning needs, they must invest in professional development specific to the needs of neurodiverse students. Furthermore, learning specialists and other special education professionals must take the lead in creating and evaluating support programs in independent schools.
This dissertation of Andrea Gail Steinman is approved.

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2019
DEDICATION

Thank you to my mother for the countless hours spent creating a database of contact information necessary to find participants, and for transcribing my interviews. Thank you to my husband for spending days in the coffee shop at UCLA while I was in class, just so I would not have to make the 5-hour round trip commute alone. Thank you to my sister, for her editing expertise. And especially thanks to my son, who is my inspiration in everything I do. Finally, thank you to all of my friends and colleagues at Palm Valley School, all of whom supported me in every way possible.
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Federal law and state policies regarding special education do not apply to independent schools (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). Private and independent schools do not have to follow the tenets of federal disability law; therefore, they do not regularly report their practices or student outcomes to outside organizations or the government (Taylor, 2005) as public schools are required to do (IDEA, 2004). Although there is anecdotal data to suggest that independent schools are serving students with learning differences (Vantine, 2016), there are few studies that describe how independent schools identify and support these students.

Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, through the early 2000s, the percentage of students in public school being served by federally supported special education programs increased from 8.3% of the total public school enrollment to 13.8%. Although this number did not increase dramatically between 2004 and 2014, there has been a shift within the group of students receiving special education services. Whereas some categories of disability—such as specific learning disability, intellectual disability, or speech and language disability—have diminished or remained stable since IDEA was passed, other disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), have almost tripled in incidence since 2004 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). Specific learning disability, speech and language impairment, other impairment (such as chronic illness), and ASD represent the top four largest categories of disability of students receiving special education services. Specifically, of the approximately seven million students being served by special education programs in the public schools, 67% fall in those four categories. Thirty-five percent have specific learning disabilities, and 10% have ASD (NCES, 2017). If we accept that the incidence of students with
learning differences in independent schools is similar to that of public schools, then we can assume that the incidence of students with special or diverse learning needs has risen within independent schools as well. For students in all other educational settings (public and charter), there is objective data to demonstrate how students are identified and supported while receiving accommodations or special education services; however, such data does not exist for private and independent schools. Students with learning differences are also members of a historically marginalized group, which gives this research a social justice context. This context, combined with the lack of data on what independent schools are doing to identify and support students with learning differences, highlighted the need for this study.

Although not all schools have experienced declining enrollments, the national trend in declining enrollment in private education is well documented (Hobbs, 2017; Murnane & Reardon, 2017). California alone has experienced a 25% enrollment decline in private schools since 2000 (Reese, 2019). The National Association of Independent Schools has acknowledged this fact (Hobbs, 2017) and has been providing resources to member schools to both increase enrollment and manage organizational change. One such change is the acceptance of once excluded and marginalized students; “Private schools are lowering tuition, ramping up marketing and targeting traditionally underrepresented communities to reverse a national enrollment decline” (Hobbs, 2017, para. 1).

In the following sections, I introduce the obstacles that make it difficult to support students with ASD in independent schools. I then describe the gaps that exist in the literature, explain how my research questions guided my study of the problem, and discuss how my study helped to fill this gap in the literature.
Impetus for Conducting the Study

As part of a larger project, my school site participated in a small study to evaluate the level of knowledge of our own school’s process for identifying and supporting students with diverse learning needs. The faculty’s knowledge of academic supports and accommodations was surveyed, as well as their level of comfort in supporting the students in their classes who require accommodations. Through this research, it became clear to the Head of School that there was an emerging problem with our ability to serve the growing number of students that required support or accommodation. A resource specialist was hired, and this specialist began the work of organizing the process for our school of identifying, documenting, and serving diverse learners in our school. Of a total population of approximately 350 students, 60 now have individualized learning plans (Steinman, 2017).

Through this action research project, the school learned that there has been a marked increase each year, for the past 5 years, in not only the number of existing/already enrolled students identified as having learning challenges, but also in the increased percentage of new students that required accommodations. Out of 10 new students in the upper school in the 2017-2018 academic school year, five were students on an individualized learning plan. Two years prior, during the 2015-2016 school year, there were seven students who required support or accommodations in a population of 70. By the 2018-2019 school year, the total number had increased to 13 with the overall population remaining the same at 70. In the 2019-2020 school year, that number has increased again to 16 in a total population of 69 students (Steinman, 2017).

Outside of this action research report, there are limited data on the growth of students in independent schools who require accommodations. An additional challenge was that independent
schools are not required to participate in any reporting on their student populations (Taylor, 2005), and thus only data that is voluntarily submitted by private and independent schools was readily available.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Private and independent schools are not legally mandated to provide special education services unless they receive public funding (IDEA, 2004). However, any independent school that is a member of the NAIS should be following the Principles of Good Practice in Admissions (NAIS, 2016), which states, “In establishing policies, procedures, and goals for student recruitment and enrollment, the school makes inclusivity a central tenet, while also complying with local, state, and federal laws” (para 3). Unfortunately, there is no enforcement mechanism for this suggested best practice. A lack of enforcement protocols creates a grey area in which independent schools may or may not accept students who require academic support, or may or may not provide services for current students. Without a regulating or enforcing body or a reporting requirement, it is difficult to assess the quality of the support or accommodations provided. The lack of regulation and accountability can lead to underreporting and non-reporting (Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007), resulting in there being very little data available regarding the practice of identifying and supporting diverse learners in independent schools.

In addition to a lack of data, there is very little original research into the practices of independent schools and their support of diverse learners. Some research has been done in the private school sector by Shannon Taylor (2003), an educational researcher who specializes in studying special education in private schools. Beginning with her dissertation in 2003, she investigated the private school climate in Tennessee and the struggles that private schools have
faced in trying to serve their diverse learning population. Taylor highlighted the ambiguity of the federal laws about disabilities, describing how they create tension between what parents expect their children will receive in terms of special education supports in private schools and what schools are required to provide. In a further study, Taylor (2005) explained that there is no legally mandated oversight of special education practice in private schools. This lack of oversight, combined with the lack of mandatory reporting of student outcomes, makes it virtually impossible to assess how students with diverse learning needs are being identified and supported in private or independent schools.

Given the lack of research on the practices of independent schools, I reviewed literature on private, parochial, and charter schools as a framework for understanding the complexities of how independent schools may provide support for students with learning differences. Independent local educational agency (LEA) charter schools may serve as a proxy population since these charter schools, like independent schools, are stand alone organizations that do not have the resources of a larger district or organization to help them with the costs of identifying and serving students with learning differences. This makes them a good comparison group for independent schools.

According to Rhim and McLaughlin (2001), there are three main types of charter schools that are common across states with charter school legislation: total linkage charters, partial linkage charters, and no linkage charters. In this context, linkage refers to the amount of connection that charters have to their local school district. A no linkage charter school, also known as an independent LEA charter school, is one in which the school is a completely
independent charter school, unaffiliated with any local public school district or LEA (Drame, 2011), and thus is most similar to an independent school.

Funding is a primary concern for most independent LEA charter schools, especially those that have high startup costs involving capital and infrastructure debt, and thus have similar funding and financing concerns to independent schools. Additionally, those schools that do not have a charter relationship with a local district or other independent LEA charter schools have no ability to pool resources or share qualified staff to provide special education services (Estes, 2004). Funding is also an ongoing issue for independent schools that are providing support for students who need special education services. Independent schools use a budgeting model based on the average cost of educating a student, but tuition rarely covers those costs, and fundraising is used to make up the rest (Farber, 2012). Accommodations and services can change the costs for individuals significantly, and as the numbers of individuals requiring services go up, so too does the annual cost of providing services. In independent LEA charters, as well as parochial and independent schools, the costs of providing services for students with learning differences are compounded by a lack of distributed cost sharing that would exist in a school district setting (California Legislative Analyst’s Office [CLAO], 2013).

**Project Summary Statement**

To fill the established gap in the literature, I investigated the processes that independent schools use to identify students on the autism spectrum and those with learning differences, how independent schools create accommodations for these students, how they track and document outcomes of students with diverse learning needs, and what supports, if any, they use in the general education classroom. I investigated whether there has been an increase in the willingness
of independent schools to address learning differences, because overall enrollment has declined in the past 20 years. In the absence of regulation, it is important to understand how independent schools are serving their growing population of students with learning differences.

In understanding how independent schools identify and support students with learning differences, the following research questions guided my study:

1. How do independent high schools that support students with autism spectrum disorder create, implement, and evaluate support plans for students on the autism spectrum.

2. How are supports and strategies chosen? Are independent school personnel aware if their support practices are based on current research?

This study investigated the process used by independent schools to support students with ASD. This study also addressed the process used by independent schools to create accommodations and document outcomes of supported students.

ASD is commonly defined as a group of developmental disorders that reflects a wide range of symptoms, skills, and levels of disability. These may include the following characteristics: social problems, including difficulty communicating with others; repetitive behaviors; limited interests in normal activities; and other symptoms that negatively influence the individual’s ability to function at home, school, work, or in other areas of life. This is considered a spectrum disorder because some experience mild symptoms, whereas others are moderately or severely disabled (NIMH, 2016). Autism spectrum disorder or ASD represents the fastest growing population of students within the special education sphere (NCES, 2017).
Overview of Research Design

For this study I used an instrumental case study design. As Stake (1995) pointed out, case studies are effective in describing or expanding our knowledge of a phenomenon, and are commonly used to investigate programs and people, especially in education. Via interviews, I collected data from parents and personnel in independent day schools: with a high school (or upper school, as they are known in independent schools), that are members of the NAIS, that have a student population of 500 students or less, and that serve students in grades nine through 12. According to NAIS (2009), independent schools are defined by an independent governance and financing structure. As nonprofit entities, they are governed by a board of trustees and are primarily supported through tuition, donations, and endowment income. They are accountable to state and regional accrediting associations, boards of trustees, and the families who send their students to the schools themselves.

Site and Population

Independent schools in the Southern California region who are members of NAIS were chosen for this study: specifically, day schools that serve high school aged students. Out of 1,672 schools in the region, there were 1,438 schools that met criteria in the NAIS. Those 1,438 schools serve approximately 632,000 students. Schools that are part of this population represent the broadest range of schools in NAIS. The population of this study was the 1,400 NAIS campuses that have a student population of 500 students or fewer, and that serve students in grades nine through 12. I chose to include schools this size because they make up a majority of all independent schools, a better representative group of the typical NAIS school. Using purposive sampling, I narrowed the population further by choosing NAIS schools in the greater...
Southern California region so that I could physically visit and spend time on each campus. Stake (1995) asked, “which cases are likely to lead us to understandings, to assertions, perhaps even to modifying of generalizations?” (p. 4). In being able to visit each site, I was able to obtain a deeper set of perceptions, view the location that informs and limits school services, and see teachers and students interact.

Data Collection

Conducting interviews was necessary to gain insight into the specific strategies that schools say they use to support students on the autism spectrum. The number of interviews undertaken was based on when saturation might be reached, based on purposive sampling (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). I conducted 12 interviews, reviewing each interview as it was conducted, and taking notes in memo form to determine emerging codes and themes. After conducting 12 interviews, it appeared that data saturation had been reached.

Finally, I conducted a review of the 1,340 articles of Independent School Magazine and 278 articles of Independent Teacher Magazine, both publications of the NAIS. The goal of this review was to identify the presence of articles or discussion of students on the autism spectrum, and to ascertain whether or not the growing population of students with learning differences in independent schools is being reported on or addressed by the NAIS and their member schools. Of all reviewed articles, only four in Independent School Magazine mentioned learning differences in general, and only one mentioned ASD specifically. In Independent Teacher Magazine, four articles mentioned learning differences and there were no mentions of ASD. This document review provided evidence of a gap in the literature, supporting the need for this study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

As discussed in Chapter One, there is a lack of published literature on how independent schools address the needs of students with learning differences. In creating a framework for my research, I examined the literature on schools that are comparable to independent schools, namely charter schools, and other non public schools, such as parochial schools.

Special Education and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Special education encompasses all students with any recognized disability. Disabled students make up almost 14% of the total public school enrollment (NCES, 2016). As stated in Chapter One, this study explored the process independent schools use to support students diagnosed with ASD. ASD reflects the largest growing segment of students identified as needing educational support in private schools (NCES, 2016; Taylor, 2005). In addition to understanding the definitions from the research, it is also important to understand the history of special education, and how this student population has grown and affected education and educational policy, as well as the common ways that private schools support these students in the general education classroom.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is not a learning disability, although there is a significant co-association between ASD and specific learning disabilities (O’Brien & Pearson, 2004). Autism, a disorder first proposed by child psychiatrist Leo Kanner in 1943 (as cited in Baker, 2013), is defined:

in terms of two categories: persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication and social interaction, plus restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, both present from early childhood; diagnosis requires specifying presence or absence of accompanying intellectual disability, language impairment, or associated medical or genetic condition. (p. 1089)
The incidence of ASD has significantly increased since 2004 (Leach & Duffy, 2009; NCES, 2016). ASD has continued to be an area of growth in special education in public schools (NCES, 2016) and represents 10% of all students receiving special education services (NCES, 2017). There is also documented growth of students with ASD in independent schools (Mitchell, 2014; Steinman, 2017).

History of Special Education Legislation and Relevant Case Law

Even though many parents choose an independent school setting for their children specifically because they are not satisfied with what their local public school district has to offer, it is still essential to investigate the history of special education in the public schools. Public schools represent the largest group of schools currently educating the majority of students with learning differences (NCES, 2017). Almost all special education study and practice derives from the current public school system. In order to have an understanding of how students should be supported in the independent school setting, we must understand the current identification and support processes for most students with learning differences.

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, millions of disabled children have been the recipients of a free and appropriate education, after having been excluded from the public education system previously (Gordon, 2006). The ESEA began the process of recognizing the responsibility of the public school system to educate “handicapped children” when it was amended in 1966 to begin giving grants to the states to the develop a program for handicapped children (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 1965). In 1970, the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) passed Congress. The EHA gave
more explicit direction to the states to develop programs to bring handicapped children into public schools.

New legislation gave children and parents new rights, and as an outgrowth of these rights two highly influential cases went before the Supreme Court in the early 1970s, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (PARC) and *Mills v. Board of Education* (Mills). In *PARC*, a class action suit, the court found that many students were denied a public education on the basis of their disability. The court declared that public schools were required to provide to disabled children “free, public program of education and training appropriate to the child’s capacities” (PARC v. Commonwealth, 1972). In *Mills*, seven African American disabled students were denied due process when they were denied access to public education. According to the *Mills* decision, “publicly supported education of all the children of the District, including these ‘exceptional’ children” (Mills v. Board of Education, 1972, p.). *PARC* and *Mills* both coopted the language of *Brown v. Board of Education* and gave Congress the legal authority to create sweeping legislation on behalf of disabled students (Gordon, 2006).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) dramatically changed education for disabled students, as well as the process by which school districts delivered services. Public schools were now required to provide physically and mentally handicapped children equal access to public education. More importantly, however, the EAHCA (1975) created the process of developing individual education plans for students, as well as an administrative mechanism by which parents and districts must work together to resolve disputes over educational decisions and placements. The law included four major goals: (a) to ensure special education services were made available to the children who need them, (b) to provide
services in a fair and appropriate manner, (c) to establish auditing and administrative procedures
for delivering services, and (d) to provide funding for states to create special education programs.

In 1990, Congress reauthorized the EAHCA as the Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act (IDEA). IDEA consists of four parts; Part A and Part B are the primary parts of
the legislation addressed here. They include the general provisions of the law and the assistance
available to all children with disabilities in the public education system. Parts C and D deal with
infants and toddlers and federal funding programs, respectively (Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act [IDEA], 2004). Although IDEA contains most of the same requirements from the
EAHCA from which it is derived, it rearticulates some of the more important aspects of EAHCA,
also known as the six pillars or principles of the IDEA:

1. An Individualized Education Program or IEP;

2. A Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE);

3. A public education provided in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE);

4. Placement of children in special education using an Appropriate Evaluation process;

5. Participation of parents and Education Professionals in the process; and

6. A set of Procedural Safeguards, meant to protect the rights of students, parents and
   education professionals (IDEA, 2004).

Although the laws and case law discussed here may leave the reader with the impression
that there is a great deal of bureaucracy in this complicated system, at a minimum, there are
various safeguards built in to protect the rights of all disabled students in securing an appropriate
education. The same cannot be said in the private and independent school world with regard to
protecting the rights of disabled students.
Identification of Students with Learning Differences

IDEA (2004) delineates the process by which states identify students with learning differences in the public school system. Each state is required to create a Child Find program, based on the mandate in the IDEA, which directs all school districts to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities. The mandate requires that states develop a Child Find program, but states are left to determine how the program will be designed and implemented. However, the states must codify the process in their education code, including a timeline for the evaluation, assessments, and follow-up meeting to discuss the individualized education plan (IEP): the formal document that describes the school district’s plan for delivering special education services and accommodations for a student if they have been qualified for services. In California, the timeline is quite rigid. Although the counting of days can be rather complicated, in general, a district has 15 days from the time of referral to create an assessment plan and timeline (California Education Code 56043(a)). Referrals can be made by a teacher, administrator, or parent through the Child Find process, as defined in each state. Once the assessment plan has been proposed to the parents and the parents agree to the plan, the district has 60 days to determine eligibility, conduct assessments, and complete the IEP in its entirety (California Education Code 56043(c)). After the IEP meeting, where all parties, parents, teachers, and district officials agree to the educational plan, that plan remains in effect until one of the parties requests a meeting, or for 3 years, which is when the IEP is reviewed for renewal (California Education Code 56043(k)).

For independent schools, there is no formal policy for the identification and support of students with learning differences in any of the available materials from either the California
Association of Independent Schools or the NAIS. Both organizations have collections of what they call best practices, but offer very little regarding this student population. California charter schools are required to follow the federal education laws and the state policies created in the Child Find process, regardless of whether or not they are affiliated with a local school district.

**Non Public Schools and Special Education Services Private, Independent, and Independent Charter Schools**

Three kinds of nonpublic schools are the focus of this literature review. Some organizations, like the U.S. Department of Education, lump independent schools in with other private schools (Broughman, Rettig, & Peterson, 2017), but there are important distinctions between NAIS member schools and other private schools. As discussed in Chapter One, the NAIS (2019) defines an independent school as having an independent governance and financing structure. They are nonprofit entities, are governed by a board of trustees, and are primarily supported through tuition, donations, and endowment income. They are accountable to state and regional accrediting associations, boards of trustees, and the families who send their students to independent schools. The recommended governance model of the NAIS (2016) is the “corporate model of a self-perpetuating board where the board chooses itself and its successors and is focused largely on the strategic future of the school” (para 4).

Some private schools are for-profit schools, or they are nonprofit organizations that are wholly owned and operated by an individual. These private schools would not be considered independent schools by the NAIS. This is an important distinction, because this study focused only on NAIS member schools. Schools that do not belong to a larger organization have less oversight. Parochial schools are private schools that are supported by a church or parish (Bello,
To confuse matters, parochial schools can be independent and members of the NAIS, or otherwise private. In the United States, there are over 11,000 private schools that do not belong to any private school association (Broughman et al., 2017). This is significant, because in addition to not being held to the legal requirement to provide special education services to which a public or charter school would be held, a private school that is unassociated with a private school association also lacks any voluntary oversight from a higher authority on best practices in education.

Charter schools are defined in many ways, but this literature review focuses specifically on those schools defined in Chapter One, no linkage charter schools, also known as independent LEA charter schools, or independent charters, which are unaffiliated with any local public school district or LEA (Drame, 2011).

**Public Special Education Services for Parentally Placed Private School Children**

Although this research focused on services for students with learning differences provided by independent schools, it is important to point out that some students in private schools can participate in public school provided special education services. There is a common misconception that students who are parentally placed in private or independent schools are not entitled to special education services from their local public school district (Sopko, 2013). The term *parentally placed*, as used in this literature review, simply refers to students placed in a private school setting by their parent’s choice, and not by recommendation of the public school system. Students who are parentally placed in private and independent schools can participate in some special education activities and services, with limitations (IDEA, 2004; Smith & Runyan, 1995). The type of services that public schools are required to provide and where those services
are provided are points that are still debated and often subject to court rulings on actions of claim (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998). However, as states continue to organize themselves to comply with the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA and provide further guidance to local school districts or LEAs, some standardization is becoming recognizable across the states (Sopko, 2013).

Since the passage of the 1997 version of the IDEA, public school districts have been required to provide services “designed to meet the needs of private school (disabled) children residing in the jurisdiction of the agency” (IDEA, 1997, p. 51). The change in this clause brought about by the 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA makes the local agency or school district responsible for the students whose private (or independent) school is within the boundaries of the district. This aspect of service requirement falls under the Child Find mandate of the IDEA. This mandate requires school districts or LEAs to seek out any children that may be in need of special education services and determine their eligibility. This includes private, independent, and home-schooled students, as well as preschool-aged children (IDEA, 2004). Districts and LEAs usually send notices to the private and independent schools within their boundaries, inviting representatives from these schools to participate in an annual meeting where available services are discussed and eligibility requirements for services are explained (Riverside County Special Education Local Plan Area, 2017). Once the disabled students in private and independent schools are identified, the LEA uses this information to determine how much of their special education budget will be dedicated to providing these identified students with services, and which services will be offered.

However, no concrete set of special education services is available to parentally placed students in private and independent schools (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998; Sopko, 2013). Rather,
state and local education agencies determine the extent of the funds made available to provide special education services to private and independent school students based on the Child Find process (Katsiyannis & Maag, 1998). Sopko (2013) documented the complexity of this system and the difficulty in trying to find commonality in how services are provided to students with disabilities who have been parentally placed in private schools. In a study of the State Education Agencies (SEAs) of the 50 states, 29 of 35 surveys returned show that a majority of SEAs now have policies requiring some form of special education services be provided to students who are in private and independent schools.

The most common types of services provided to parentally placed students in private and independent schools by LEAs are referred to as “related services” or “non-classroom based services” (Riverside County Special Education Local Plan Area, 2017). These services include speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and Special Education Itinerant Teacher Services. Related services are provided outside the regular classroom, outside normal school hours, or at the child’s private or independent school (Office of Special Education [OSE], 2011). The ability of some parents to coordinate services for their children with learning differences has placed somewhat less pressure on non public schools to increase provision of services. However, the services made available by the LEAs to parentally placed students with disabilities are highly limited, and do not provide all of the supports a student functioning in a general education classroom with learning differences would need.
A Brief History of Private and Independent Schools’ Accommodation of Students with Learning Differences

To understand why private and independent schools have not traditionally identified or supported students with special needs, it is important to understand why parents choose independent schools in the first place. Primarily, parents report that they choose a nonpublic education option due to reasons of quality, such as instructional style, class size, or curriculum (Bosetti, 2004; Bukhari & Randall, 2009). However, issues of school climate, culture, and religious or values education also affect parental school choice decisions. Most parents choose a private or independent education for their child because they expect to see higher achievement, higher test scores, and better access to top universities and colleges (Bello, 2006; Bosetti, 2004; Egalite & Wolf, 2016)

Private and other non-public schools, like independent schools, tend to have a more limited curriculum. The limited curriculum is normally based on the fact that non-public schools tend to be smaller and have fewer offerings. At first, this may sound like a negative, but for most independent schools, the focus is more geared toward college preparation than a typical public school (Bello, 2006), so the limitation means fewer general level courses and more Honors and Advanced Placement courses (Vantine, 2016). Because of the limited curriculum, due to school size, and the focus on high academic standards, it is difficult to provide alternative tracks or programs for students with learning differences (Bello, 2006; Erickson, 2017). In fact, the pressure to meet the expectations of parents who choose private and independent education is the primary reason for private schools dismissing or refusing to enroll students who struggle academically or have learning differences (Bello, 2006).
The draw of parents to a smaller school setting is well documented (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). The idea of a more intimate setting and smaller class sizes leads many parents to assume that these considerations will lead to higher academic standards and performance (Bello, 2006; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). However, a smaller school with fewer staff and fewer class options is less able to provide the variety of classes or services that would enable students with learning differences to get the specialized help that they need. The more neurodiverse the student body becomes, the less a smaller school can adapt its curriculum to serve students spread across a growing academic spectrum. Parents often assume that a smaller environment can provide the more individualized instruction that students with learning differences need (Bello, 2016; Bosetti, 2004; McLaughlin, 2002), but beyond the extra attention that small class sizes may provide, smaller schools simply do not have the staff to offer multiple levels of the same class, or additional instructional support for students outside of general education classes.

The number of students with learning differences across all school types is well documented as increasing (NCES, 2016), and there is evidence that the number of students with learning differences in independent schools is also increasing. Although the public school system has continued the drive toward inclusion as the goal for students with learning differences, many independent schools have taken a different approach. According to data from the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), the number of independent schools has increased 161% since 1993-1994, whereas the number of independent schools specifically for students with learning disabilities (LDs) has increased by 430% (Mitchell, 2014). These statistics suggest that in the world of independent schools over the past 20 years, one response to the increase in students with learning differences has been to segregate students into schools that primarily focus
instruction toward specifically supporting students with learning differences. According to Vantine (2016), there has also been an increase of students with learning differences in schools that are not primarily focused on their needs, and most special educators and researchers would agree that segregated strategies are not educationally appropriate for students with learning differences (Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren, 2015; McLaughlin, 2002; Morningstar, Shogren, Lee, & Born, 2015). Special education experts believe that inclusive education is the appropriate standard for students with any disability (Wang & Birch, 1984).

### Review of NAIS Website and Publications

Because no studies have been conducted on teaching diverse learners in independent schools, I reviewed NAIS publications to determine if any focus on neurodiversity could be found. The two publications, *Independent School Magazine* and *Independent Teacher*, are ones that teachers and administrators regularly read. They would not have access to academic research articles, nor would they be likely to read them if they were available since they are often not written in lay language.

I hoped I would find some recognition of a growing problem facing many independent schools, and possibly some guiding information to support development of procedures and best practices. The “About” page of the NAIS website states, “NAIS empowers independent schools and the students they serve. The association offers research and trend analysis, leadership and governance guidance, and professional development opportunities for school and board leaders” (NAIS, n.d., para. 3). Additionally, as part of its core values, NAIS states, “The independent school community has a long-standing commitment to the principles of equity and
justice. At NAIS we provide ways for schools to build on this commitment through professional development, best practice, and idea sharing” (para. 1).

Especially given that NAIS is the organizational leader to which the community of independent schools looks for guidance, one would expect to find some literature in NAIS’s offerings addressing support for students with learning differences. However, a review of the available guides of best practice and the organization’s publications yielded almost none.

*Independent School Magazine* is published online and on paper four times a year. Online access to the magazine is not limited to members, and the publication can be accessed free of charge on the NAIS website. Between the years of 2008 and summer of 2019, 44 issues of *Independent School Magazine* were published, including approximately 1,340 articles. In reviewing those articles, I was able to identify four instances where learning differences were mentioned either in an announcement or in an article, and of those, only one article specifically mentioned students with ASD.

The first reference to learning differences occurred in the Spring 2009 issue (*Independent School Magazine, 2009*), which features a small blurb referring to a listserve about learning differences for independent school teachers. Although that listserve no longer exists, the blurb describes a discussion forum for learning differences within the NAIS Connect community forums. Unlike the publication, *Independent School Magazine*, Connect community forums are not available to the public, and are only available to member schools. Even so, with more than 1,400 member schools, the learning differences forum was bereft of activity, with only one post in the last 30 days and 14 posts in the last 6 months. Of those, only two had received any replies, at one each (See Appendix C).
In the Spring 2010 issue of *Independent School Magazine* (Independent School Magazine, 2010), Auburn School published its intent to open new campuses in Maryland specifically to serve *high functioning* students with a diagnosis of ASD. This announcement serves as further evidence that the trend over the last 10 years in independent schools has been to segregate students with diverse learning needs into special schools or programs. Although the publication of this announcement shows some acknowledgement of the population of students in independent schools with autism, no further educational content was included.

In the Spring of 2016, Vantine published an article on academic supports for students with learning differences. The model of instruction she describes is built on offering a majority of the support effort to teachers, but also notes that there needs to be a robust plan of professional development.

The next instance of any reference to diverse learners was found in an article on co-teaching in the Spring 2018 issue. The author tells a story of a lesson being presented by two teachers in a science class, each offering small groups of students different forms of mastery demonstration, as well as providing support to students using different presentation techniques. The story provides the basis for explaining the school’s policy of co-teaching, but it does not truly delve into the student’s specific need for differentiation so much as it makes an argument that differentiation is good educational practice, and that having two teachers in a classroom for lessons allows for more types of instruction (McMullen, 2018).

There were more articles related to students with learning differences in the issues of *Independent Teacher Magazine*. *Independent Teacher* is published online twice a year, and online archives were available going back to the Fall of 2003. From 2003 to the Spring of 2019, 32
issues were published, including approximately 278 articles. Of those articles, four referenced students with learning differences, none of them specific to ASD.

From Fall 2003 to Spring 2013, there were no further articles on the topic. In Spring 2013, *Independent Teacher* published an article specific to the needs of students with learning differences. In this article, Anderson (2013) gave teachers some pointers on how to structure classroom activities and lessons, such as, “Having an elastic, accepting, and caring mindset, providing direct instruction, creating time for collaboration, and teaching advocacy” (para. 1). Some strategies suggested providing clear instructions to teachers on how to support students who are not neurotypical, such as meeting individually or in small groups to increase attention and engagement, and pre-teaching new content by showing pictures and videos or having students research the topic ahead of time. Although Anderson is a learning specialist, the article is specifically written as a how-to for teachers, and not from the perspective of whole school policy or support for students who are outside the norm.

In Spring of 2017, authors Herro and Bozzo presented the argument that individual specific disabilities should be referred to simply as *learning differences* and accepted as part of the landscape of neurodiversity. After a brief description of the growth of diagnoses and a reference to the “culture of disabilities” (para. 1), the authors reached their main point, which is that differentiation is simply good teaching and should be the practice for all students. Herro and Bozzo provided some good suggestions for how teachers in the classroom should be differentiating, but ultimately they explained that good teaching skills in differentiation require “targeted professional development, planning time, access to materials, ongoing support, consultation, and coaching” (para. 13).
The articles reviewed in this document analysis show that overwhelmingly in independent schools, it is the teachers’ responsibility to differentiate and accommodate in order to support student learning in the classroom. In each of the articles reviewed, appropriate training and coaching for teachers to develop the skills they need to address a diverse student population are mentioned as the biggest single need in independent schools. Moreover, there is a consensus amongst the authors that there is growth of neurodiversity in independent school student populations, and this growth is straining the resources of independent schools.

**Common Practice in Supporting Students with Learning Differences in a General Education Setting**

Inclusive education has been the dominant paradigm in special education for the last 25 years (Evmenova & Behrmann, 2011; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014; Wang & Birch, 1984). Inclusive education simply means students with any disability are educated in the general education classroom with their peers as much as possible (IDEA, 2004).

Swanson (2001) pointed out that no two students with learning differences are the same. Therefore, it is essential that a teacher have various strategies at their disposal in addressing the needs of these students in the general education classroom. There are many recognized strategies that would be considered *common practice* when it comes to educating students with learning differences (McLaughlin, 2002; Morningstar et al., 2015). Most supports for students with learning differences, whether they be accommodations or instructional strategies, are shown to be most effective when students are a part of inclusive education (Fuchs et al., 2014).
Accommodations

Accommodation is commonly defined as a change in the testing of a student that allows for the accurate measurement of a construct (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004). Testing accommodations are the most common supports for students with learning differences in the general education classroom setting (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004; Lewandowski, Lovett, & Rogers 2008). The most common testing accommodations for students with learning differences is the provision of extended time (Lovett, 2010). Extended time testing has been shown to be beneficial for students who have specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or dysgraphia (Lewandowski et al., 2008; Lovett, 2010). It is important to mention that extended time accommodations are still controversial and the literature is currently split on the effectiveness of this accommodation (Lai & Berkeley, 2012; Gregg & Nelson, 2012); however, it is currently the most commonly accepted form of testing accommodations in practice (Lovett, 2010).

Other forms of testing accommodations include physical space accommodations such as preferential seating and separate testing areas, including small group settings. There are also process-based accommodations in testing, such as having someone read aloud the test questions or act as a scribe for students (Sireci et al., 2005). Some students prefer to use a device, such as a word processor, instead of handwriting assessments. Although all of these have been documented as approved testing accommodations, none of them are as common as extended testing time (Lovett, 2010; Sireci, Scarpati, & Li, 2005). Testing accommodations are used across the board and are common for both students with a specific learning disability and other diagnoses, including ASD.
Testing accommodations should not be confused with instructional practices, which are a part of inclusive education in a general education classroom (Scanlon & Baker, 2012). These strategies are widely studied, and many sources have acknowledged that they are good for all students (Swanson, 2001). However, there are a specific few strategies within this group of supports that are recognized as specifically helpful for students with learning differences.

**Instructional Strategies and Content Supports**

For all students with learning differences, providing a variety of instructional formats is key to maintaining engagement and multiple options for understanding. Instructional strategies are ways in which teachers deliver instruction. Instructional format strategies include small group instruction, cooperative learning, one-on-one instruction, peer teaching, and whole group lessons (Leach & Duffy, 2009; Scanlon & Baker, 2012). Variations on this theme include pair work, student led demonstrations, and project-based learning.

Another form of inclusive education in the general education classroom is content supports, which enable students to interact with content in multiple ways. One such support is to offer students a choice, which enables them to interact with content on their own terms (Kurth et al., 2015). Another good example of a content support is a graphic organizer, which provides a visual representation of significant content and can take many forms. Additional content supports include teacher-provided outlines or student-provided notes. When students help each other by creating notes together or allowing notes to be borrowed, this combines instructional strategy and content support. Teachers should be offering students a choice in how they access content to ensure that students with learning differences can interact with the content in their own way (Singleton & Filee, 2015).
More intensive instructional strategies tend to go beyond accommodation and general strategies that most good classroom teachers use. Fuchs et al. (2014) described these general strategies of Response to Intervention (RTI) as Tier 1. The expectation is that all students will benefit from good teaching:

This instruction should include providing virtually all students with the core instructional program, classroom routines meant to provide opportunity for instructional differentiation, and accommodations that in principle permit access to the primary prevention programs as well as problem-solving strategies for addressing students’ motivation and behavior. (p. 13)

Fuchs et al. explained that these Tier 1 strategies are instructional practice that is derived from research, but not necessarily validated. The suggestion is that students should be assessed to determine if they are improving with high quality Tier 1 instruction, or whether more intensive instruction is needed. Tier 2 instruction involves targeted small group interventions with specialist teachers who can address specific deficits. There is a Tier 3, or Intensive Intervention, as well. After Tier 1 instruction, students are assessed to determine if they can return to Tier 1, or if they need more intensive instruction. RTI was introduced in the IDEA reauthorization of 2004 as a response to the higher incidence of specific learning disabilities, which education professionals believed could be addressed through early intervention (Morningstar et al, 2015).

The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) created in the ESSA of 2015 is an umbrella of strategies that encompasses RTI practice. The goal of MTSS is to make data-driven decisions and implement research-based interventions to support students with learning differences. Like the tiers mentioned previously in RTI, these strategies have been implemented successfully in lower grades, and have now been extended into the high school grades. However, the MTSS model works differently in high school where pulling students out for small group
Interventions disrupt the delivery of content too much. MTSS at the high school level is newer and less evaluated than at the elementary level of instruction (Morningstar et al., 2015).

Evidence-based practices that support students with ASD often focus on supports that help students develop better social, communication, organization, and coping skills. Autism research on school-based intervention tends to look at social and communication interactions, and their influence on development in the areas of joint attention and social behavior. However, the success of school-based interventions depends on appropriate training of teachers (Toolan & Kasari, 2016).

**Challenges in Providing Support for Students with Learning Differences: Non Public Schools and Charter Schools**

There is a decided lack of published work regarding the practices of independent schools when it comes to their support of students with learning differences. This gap in the literature underscores the importance of my study of independent school practices. However, because of this absence of information in the literature, I expanded my literature review to encompass the current obstacles in providing supports for students with learning differences in nonpublic schools such as Catholic schools and independent charter schools. The funding models for nonpublic schools and independent charter schools are similar to independent schools, and all struggle to provide appropriate supports to their students with learning differences (Bello, 2006; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001; Vantine, 2016).

As discussed in Chapter One, funding is a primary concern for most independent LEA charter schools (Estes, 2004), something that independent charters have in common with independent schools and other private schools, such as Catholic schools. Schools that do not
have a charter relationship with their local district have no ability to pool resources or share qualified staff to provide special education services (Drame, 2011; Estes, 2004; McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998). Independent schools use a budgeting model based on the average cost of educating a student, but often this funding model does not consider the extra costs associated with supporting students with learning differences (Farber, 2012; Vantine, 2016). Like Catholic schools and independent charters (Bello, 2006; Drame, 2011), independent schools may not realize how much they need to budget for special education services for a year, and there is no larger body, like a school district or state agency, from which they can request funds. Accommodations and services can significantly change the costs of educating individual students, and as the numbers of individuals requiring services goes up, so too does the annual cost of providing services. In independent charters, independent schools, and other nonpublic schools, the cost of providing services for students with learning disabilities is compounded by a lack of distributed cost sharing, which would exist in a school district setting (Bello, 2006; CLAO, 2013; Drame, 2011). If there are enough independent schools in a geographic area, they could potentially pool resources and share the cost of special education professionals (Estes, 2004), or specialized training for general education teachers. However, this is not always an option, as there are not always schools in the area willing to participate in this arrangement. Schools facing these challenges are left to make a painful decision: create their own low cost ad hoc system for supporting students or counsel them out. Neither approach seems to be ideal for students with learning differences.
Conclusion

The goal of this review was to understand the ways in which independent schools identify and support students with learning differences. Independent schools operate outside the bounds of the federal disability laws, which pertain to students with learning disabilities, and with little oversight or regulation. Initial research and anecdotal data suggest that many independent schools are new to accepting students with learning differences (Mitchell, 2014; Steinman, 2017; Vantine, 2016). Because there is a documented increase in the identification of students with learning differences in the larger student population (NCES, 2017), there is some evidence, albeit limited, that there is also an increase of students with learning differences in the independent school world (Mitchell, 2014). There exists a gap in the literature regarding the practice of independent schools in identifying and supporting students with learning differences. Additionally, there is an intersection of the economic circumstances of falling enrollment at independent schools and the potential for students with disabilities to be marginalized within their school settings. The historic marginalization of students with learning differences adds a social justice component to this framework and together form the lens through which I conducted my research. I have highlighted the struggles of all independent charters and nonpublic schools in providing services to students with learning differences. When taken together, these factors demonstrate a strong need for this study.
Chapter Three: Methodology

As explained in Chapter One, in order to fill the established gap in the literature, I investigated the processes that independent schools use to support students with learning differences, how independent schools create accommodations for these students, how they document outcomes of students with diverse learning needs, and whether supports and strategies chosen are based in current research. I conducted 11 interviews across three schools to complete three descriptive case studies. Each site’s version of an IEP and tracking documents were reviewed for consistency with best practice, as well as other school documents such as student tracking spreadsheets, student profiles, and professional development materials. I also conducted a review of enrollment data and compared it to any increase in the acceptance and support of students with learning differences in independent schools.

Positionality Statement

This research was rooted in my own experiences as a mother of an autistic child who was a student in both public and independent schools. My son had been in a public school setting, with the benefit of an IEP and a host of supports and services. When he transitioned to an independent school, I was told under no uncertain terms that if he wanted to be a part of the independent school community where I worked, he would have to be able to manage with almost no academic support because the school was not able to provide it. This was the beginning of my experience with independent schools about 15 years ago.

The foundation of this research also stems from my professional experience as an independent school teacher and administrator in independent education. Because of my experience as the mother of an autistic student, when I was elevated to the position of Head of
Upper School, I was tasked with organizing the student support program at my school. Without an appropriate educational background in supporting students with learning differences, I struggled to create proper procedures and processes for institutionalizing our program.

Over the time during which I had been teaching, I had noticed an increase in the number of students we were accepting into our community who needed academic support and accommodation that we were not experienced in providing. I was concerned that we were changing our admission practices without regard to our ability to provide for these students in order to make up for an overall decline in admission that we and other independent schools were experiencing. These experiences created the lens through which I investigated this study.

My approach to this research was framed by what Creswell and Creswell (2014) referred to as the pragmatism worldview. In other words, I defined a problem; the increasing incidence of students with learning differences in the independent school world and the lack of structured oversight in independent schools in order to ensure that students with learning differences are being identified and supported appropriately. My research focused primarily on understanding the problem, which in time will undergird further research to derive solutions. As Creswell and Creswell stated, “Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts. In this way...studies may include a postmodern turn, a theoretical lens that is reflective of social justice and political aims” (p. 11).

There is an intersection between the economic circumstances of falling enrollment at independent schools and the potential for students with disabilities to be marginalized within their school settings. Therefore, my research was informed by this intersection of economic pressure in independent education and the political decisions that result from the realization of
falling enrollment. The historic marginalization of students with learning differences added a social justice component to this framework, forming the lens through which I conducted my research.

**Research Questions**

My research was guided by the following questions:

1. How do independent high schools that support students with autism spectrum disorder create, implement, and evaluate support plans for students on the autism spectrum.

2. How are the supports and strategies chosen? Are independent school personnel aware if their support practices are based on current evidence and research?

**Research Design and Rationale for a Qualitative Study**

For this study I used an instrumental case study design. As Stake (1995) pointed out, case studies are effective in describing or expanding knowledge of a phenomenon, and are commonly used to investigate programs and people, especially in education. Stake classified studies into the following categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Although intrinsic and instrumental case studies share some commonalities, in an instrumental case study, cases are not chosen at random, but rather carefully selected for their potential to provide deep rich data that relate to the research questions. An intrinsic case study was not appropriate in this instance because the research was not meant to be exploratory, but rather explanatory, giving the researcher the opportunity to identify themes that emerged and generalized across cases.

A case study approach allowed me to be in the field, seeing the interview subjects at their sites, observing and recording interactions, and digging deeper into the phenomenon of
supporting students on the autism spectrum in independent schools firsthand. This allowed me to see “objectively what is happening but simultaneously [examine] its meaning and [redirect] observations to refine or substantiate those meanings” (Stake, 1995, p. 9).

Taking Stake’s (2006) original interpretation of the case study farther, I analyzed the data across descriptive cases to show key findings. As Stake stated, phenomena can look different depending on the unique conditions at various sites; Stake even cited the study of the treatment of autistic children as an example. Studying only the common characteristics without looking more closely at the ways in which these common characteristics are situational and interactive with background experiences would give a less nuanced view of the data. Stake explained, “One fails to understand the phenomenon unless the explanation holds up in most individual cases” (p. 39). As Yin (2002) noted, “In this design, if the contrasting of the subsequent findings [of multiple cases] support the hypothesized contrast, the results represent a strong start toward theoretical replication” (p. 61).

**Population, Sample, and Site**

The population of this study was the approximately 1,400 NAIS campuses that have a student population of 500 students or less, and that serve students in grades nine through 12. I chose to include schools this size because they make up a majority of all independent schools, a better representative group of the typical NAIS school. The less common larger schools may have provided data that would have skewed my results and therefore made it more difficult to generalize findings or themes. Out of 1,672 schools, there were 1,438 schools that met this criteria nationwide. Those 1,438 schools serve approximately 600,000 students. Schools that are part of this population represent the broadest range of schools in NAIS. Using purposive
sampling, I narrowed the population further by choosing NAIS schools in the greater Southern California region so that I would be able to physically visit and spend time on each campus. Stake (1995) asked, “which cases are likely to lead us to understandings, to assertions, perhaps even to modifying of generalizations?” (p. 4). In being able to visit each site, I was able to witness a deeper set of perceptions, observe the location that informs and limits school services, and see teachers and students interact. The narrowed population returned a list of approximately 55 schools that were of the right size and location and had a high school.

To identify target respondents, I checked school websites to determine the names and email addresses of Division Heads, School Psychologists, or Learning Specialists. When this information was not available on the website, I made phone calls to obtain the contact information needed. I sent an introductory email letter describing the study and requesting participation. As the Division Head at a NAIS member school, I had access to a database of member schools and their contact information. NAIS gave me permission to use the database to create my original contact list from which all respondents were chosen. Specifically, target schools were independent high schools that serve students on the autism spectrum and that have a current process of accepting and accommodating students with diverse learning needs, with a student population of less than 500, from the greater Southern California region. Of the approximately 55 non-religious independent schools in the greater Southern California region that have a high school division, 22 met the overall criteria for this study and were contacted. After reaching out to all 22 schools, I received responses from eight schools that showed interest in participating. The final four schools were chosen based on the way each had chosen to serve
students with learning differences. These four schools represented a diverse set of independent schools, which provided rich qualitative data.

**Data Collection Methods**

**Interviews**

Conducting interviews was necessary to gain deep insight into the specific strategies that schools use to identify and support students. The number of interviews undertaken was based on when saturation was reached, using purposive sampling (Guest et al., 2006). According to Guest et al. (2006), data saturation can happen in as few as four interviews but can take many more to accomplish. The key to deciding how many interviews are needed is to continue interviewing and analyzing until new interviews no longer offer new themes. I planned to conduct 16 interviews, unless data saturation occurred prior to that. After 12 interviews, it appeared that data saturation had occurred.

Four schools met the criteria of my study, were willing to participate in the study, and represented a varied approach to their support of students on the spectrum: Charleston School, an independent school that primarily serves students with learning differences; York School, a well-established independent school just starting on their journey of supporting students on the spectrum; Beverly School, a newer independent school that has purposely grown a robust support system for students with diverse learning needs; and Deckard School, a traditional independent school that has a learning center through which all services and support are provided for an additional fee from the family. The Deckard school participated in the first round of interviews and then chose to drop out of the study, leaving the three schools that are highlighted
in Chapter Four (note: all names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participating institutions and individuals).

Learning specialists, administrators, teachers, and parents were interviewed when possible. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing the respondents to talk about their perceptions and understandings of processes and accommodations being used at their school sites. Interviews also allowed respondents to share more of their perceptions regarding their support of students with learning differences, as well as their concerns about preparedness and training to interact with these students.

Interviews were instrumental in allowing the respondents to describe their experiences and communicate their feelings about their schools’ processes and policies. To foster this openness, I assured participants anonymity. The independent school world is small, and I was concerned that interview participants would not feel safe to communicate their feelings and experiences if their names or their schools’ names were revealed. Interviews lasted approximately 45 - 60 minutes and were conducted in person when possible, or by videoconference, and transcribed within 24-48 hours of being recorded. The interview protocols can be seen in Appendix A.

**Document Review**

Documents were an important part of this study because they add a historical element to the research and give credence to interview respondents’ claims about policies and processes for supporting students with diverse learning needs. Policies and processes that are codified and/or available to the public provide additional support for findings. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016)
pointed out, documents can often give the researcher a historical perspective of a site, in addition to yielding information at sites where access to people is limited.

I conducted a document analysis to triangulate my findings from the interview process, making a request for documents of each interviewee. Types of documents that I sought included policy documents available at school sites, such as school handbooks, parent communications, staff memos, accommodation (learning) plan templates, process checklists, and follow-up documents such as annual reviews of student progress. I also reviewed the school websites for published information available to the public regarding a school’s support of students with learning differences, including mission statements, strategic plan documents, and curriculum information.

Policy documents, handbooks, and parent communications provided insight into the school community’s knowledge of policies and procedures as they relate to the identification and support of students with learning differences. These documents showed whether the school is making an effort to get information out to parents about how they identify and support students with learning differences. Templates—such as Individualized Learning Plans, process checklists, and annual review of student progress documents—allowed me to assess whether an infrastructure exists to provide a foundation for identification and support of students with learning differences. Finally, completed Individualized Learning Plans showed how the process results in a documented plan, what information is collected and used to produce the plan, and what supports are recommended for assessment and instruction in the general education classroom.
A review of historical enrollment data was also conducted through the NAIS data portal called DASL (Data and Analysis for School Leadership). DASL is a database built by NAIS as a resource for school leaders in comparing school data. DASL is often used by independent schools to compare their own school’s data with other schools and as a way of encouraging the practice of data-driven decision-making. DASL houses historical enrollment data on each school, which data can be used to identify enrollment trends over time. NAIS gave me permission to access this historical data for the purposes of my study.

Lastly, I conducted a review of the publications *Independent School Magazine* and *Independent Teacher*, both published by the NAIS. Ten years of issues of *Independent School Magazine* are available online. Four issues are produced each year: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. *Independent Teacher* issues are available going back to 2003, with two publications per year: one in Spring, one in Fall. Each issue was examined for any evidence of reporting on the population of students with learning differences or autism. Notations were made of articles that were relevant to this student population, as well as any evidence that NAIS schools were experiencing any growth in this type of student population. This data was used to establish the gap in the literature and show necessity for this study.

**Data Analysis**

Both Maxwell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that collection of data and analysis of data should occur simultaneously. According to Maxwell (2013), “The development of good interview questions requires creativity and insight, rather than a mechanical conversion of research questions into an interview guide” (p. 101). Whether interviews were conducted person or via videoconferencing, they were recorded on two digital
recording devices. In analyzing the interview data, I listened to each interview within 24 hours and recorded my initial thoughts in memo form. Interviews were transcribed for further review. Interviews were coded as they were conducted and I began to identify any emerging themes that had the potential to inform my revision of the interview protocol. These initial analyses helped me to focus my interview protocol and ensure that I was getting the responses I needed from the interviews in order to understand the full picture of what is happening in the identification and support of students with learning differences in independent schools.

Concurrently with the data collection process, I analyzed completed interviews and organized them into emergent themes, both within and across interviews. I used open coding for the first round of analysis and created an initial list of themes.

Not all interviews at each site were conducted within the same timeframe. Because there were often days or weeks between interviews of subjects at the same site, I was able to use the data I had collected from previous interviews in order to focus the subsequent interviews on the emerging themes that had been identified by myself and others. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, data analysis has the purpose of identifying segments in the data that help answer the research questions. The danger in this approach is the prospect that researchers might find exactly what they are looking for, regardless of what the data says. In an effort to validate the data, and to ensure that emerging themes were significant, I asked two educators—one independent school educator and one public school educator—to review interview transcripts using the research questions and identify codes. I then compared the codes identified by myself and the two other coders. The two additional coders identified approximately 81% of the same codes I had identified. From the common codes identified, I created a set of themes.
After the initial coding of the interview data, I used the data visualization software Quirkos and my simplified set of themes to review all of the interview data a second time. Using this software I was able to connect specific ideas and quotes to themes that would then be represented by colored circles, which grew as data compiled. In other words, the more interview participants discussed certain themes, the larger the circle would become. I was able to generate reports of themes and look at relationships between who was talking and what they were saying. I was able to compare teachers’ feelings on a topic with administrators’ feelings on the same topic easily and visually. This type of data analysis is what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) called looking at the data from different angles and perspectives. This process allowed me to see the main themes and eventually discover the main findings from the data.

**Role Management and Ethical Issues**

A threat to my study came from my work in an independent school that is a National Association of Independent Schools member. My work may have been seen as critical of independent school practice, and schools may have been unwilling to work with me, for fear of alienating the NAIS, or making their school look bad. In order to reassure participants, I made sure that respondent names and school names were kept confidential and data was only reported in aggregate form. There are few other role management issues related to my study. I did not include my own site for study, nor did I hold a position at my school that had me directly involved in identifying or determining supports for students with learning differences.

**Credibility and Reliability**

Validity in this study was ensured through the process of triangulation. As Maxwell (2013) reminds us, “This strategy reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic
biases due to a specific method, and allows better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops” (p. 128).

Both as a parent and administrator, I have personal experience identifying and supporting students with learning differences. Using triangulation methods has minimized any potential for bias in my data findings and maintained focus on identification of themes within the surveys and interviews. While I was interviewing, it was important for me to maintain adherence to a fairly strict interview protocol and allow respondents to respond without engaging them in unnecessary conversation. I piloted my interview protocols with regional independent schools that were excluded from the main study. I used content experts in special education to make sure that the language and vocabulary I chose for my instruments were aligned with professional standards and common knowledge of the targets of my study. I used other education professionals to review raw data to produce codes that I could compare to my own in order to validate the emerging themes I was seeing. I reviewed learning plans and sample tracking documents provided by independent schools to review their practices of support. I also reviewed the NAIS website and publications, school policies, procedures, and processes to evaluate the findings from the interview data.

Summary

Using qualitative data from interviews and site visits, this study examined how NAIS member independent high schools are supporting students with ASD: specifically, whether or not independent schools are creating learning plans for their students with ASD and if so, how learning plans are created. I also explored how independent schools report they evaluate the
effectiveness of their learning plans and whether they think the support strategies recommended in their learning plans are rooted in current research.
Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter reports the findings of 11 interviews and three site visits of independent high schools in the form of descriptive case studies. Interview subjects included teachers, administrators, learning specialists, and parents. The focus of this study was to investigate the ways in which independent schools are serving students with ASD. The interviews and observations were designed with the purpose of learning how three different schools within the independent school community in Southern California support students with ASD. The findings in this chapter address the following research questions:

1. How do independent high schools that support students with autism spectrum disorder create, implement, and evaluate support plans for students on the autism spectrum?

2. How are the supports and strategies chosen? Are independent school personnel aware if their support practices are based on current evidence and research?

There is no guiding process of oversight for independent schools when it comes to addressing the needs of students with ASD. Because there is no formal process that independent schools must follow, each school is mostly left to determine for itself the best way to support students with learning differences. As Heads of School are fond of saying, part of being independent is an anti-standardization streak, and this means that you will find a great deal of variety among independent schools. It is often hard to compare one to another without understanding the history and development of each school. Only in learning about the individual schools can we learn how the schools came to be what they are today. This was the purpose of the descriptive case studies, discussing the history of how each independent school in this study
came to support students with ASD, and the reason it was important to present this information in the form of individual case studies. In the case of public schools, all laws about the identification and support of students with disabilities are expected to be the same at every site, so generalizing across schools would not require the same kind of background information about each campus. The analysis sought to take this information and extend current understanding of independent schools’ practices in order to identify themes across the independent school spectrum. Each case informs this understanding, and the themes that emerge in the analysis help to provide generalized assertions about how independent schools are identifying and supporting students on the spectrum.

Data were coded multiple times during analysis. First, interviews were read in the context of the research questions and responses were explored for emergent themes. Each interview was read until no further themes emerged. Interviews were then read by other educators, who were only given the research questions, in order to validate the emerged themes. Codes established from the first round of analysis were compiled, compared, and assimilated into a cohesive coding framework, which was then used to evaluate the interviews again.

What became apparent from the second round of coding was that independent schools, even those whose mission is to support students with learning differences, struggle to create learning plans that specifically serve the needs of students with ASD in the classroom and in the community at large. Moreover, these schools also struggle to address how the outcomes of accommodations can be measured or qualified. Further findings show that teachers feel they are not adequately prepared to carry out the many varied strategies that most learning plans suggest.
In section one of this chapter, I present three descriptive case studies. Close attention is paid to each site’s history as a school, its history of supporting students with learning differences, and each member of the community’s perception of his/her experiences in supporting students with ASD. In addition to conducting interviews, I spent time at each site, observing the structure of the school day, witnessing student and teacher interactions, and getting a feel for the campus. To provide further context as to the structural system of creating formal academic learning plans, I conducted a review of each school’s process for creating learning plans; a sample of one school’s template plan and tracking documents can be found in Appendix B.

In the summary, key findings are examined through the lens of the research questions. Findings address the presence of common themes from the interview data presented in the individual cases, and how the presence of these themes at such disparate independent school sites might inform our understanding of what is happening across the independent school spectrum.

The three school sites which were visited for the case by case analysis are as follows:

- Charleston School - An independent day school in the greater Los Angeles area which specializes in serving students with learning differences. The four interview subjects from this site are: Shepard, a learning specialist; Cameran, a school administrator; Patricia, a parent; and Thomas, a classroom teacher.

- York School - A traditional, college preparatory, independent day school in the Palos Verdes area of Southern California. Three interview subjects from this site are: Sonja, a learning specialist; Luann, a school administrator; and Bethenny, a classroom teacher.
Beverly School - A traditional, college preparatory, independent day school in the greater San Diego area. Four interview subjects from this site are: Lisa, a school administrator; Kyle, a learning specialist; Yolanda, a parent; and Camille, a classroom teacher.

One additional school, Deckard School, provided an interview participant, a learning specialist, but declined to participate further in the study and was not included in the results.

Table 1

School Sites and Study Participants

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<tr>
<th>School Sites</th>
<th>Site Visit</th>
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<th>Learning Specialist</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Parent</th>
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<td>Shepard</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Patricia Two interviews 50 min</td>
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<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Yolanda Two interviews 50 min</td>
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<td>Luann</td>
<td>Sonja</td>
<td>Bethenny Two interviews 52 min</td>
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<td>Kate</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>One interview 40 min</td>
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Section One: Descriptive Cases

Case One: Charleston School

Overview. Charleston School is an independent middle and high school whose mission is to serve students who have learning differences, including students with ASD. Charleston was born out of a homeschooling group in the 1990s, and continues to focus its efforts on students
who need more academic and social emotional support than what a traditional independent school can offer. The population of students with ASD is approximately 45-50% of the high school, which is, in total, approximately 120 students over four grades, and students considered “high need” within the autism category represent about 15-20% of that group.

Shepard is a learning specialist who has a Master’s Degree in Education and a certificate in Educational Therapy. He has spent his career working with students who struggle academically, and specifically in independent school education. He has been a learning specialist at Charleston for approximately 6 years. When he started, the school was focused on a “push-in” model, where he would spend time with students, sometimes in the classroom, working with them one-on-one to develop their remedial skills. After spending less than a year in the school community, he realized,

I had half the high school population on my caseload so I was like, “I think we need to think about how this system, if we’re a school designed to meet the needs of this specialized population of kids, and half of them require a specialist to work with one on one everyday, like what’s the deal there.”

Shepard worked with the school’s leadership to design the notion of program development, wherein the learning specialist would help create programs and support for students that could be carried out by the teacher, advisor, counselor, and learning specialists together. One-on-one support is still an important part of his day to day work if a student has a prolonged academic issue.

Cameran is a school administrator with a Master’s in Counseling. She is working toward a degree in Clinical Psychology. After nearly 20 years of experience at Charleston, in a variety of positions, she is now the Director of Guidance. She said that this position:
means overseeing kind of like college guidance and social/emotional for the high school… When I started at [Charleston], there were like 50 kids. We were in a smaller building and so it was just like, it was different. You’re basically doing all of the different administrative tasks because there’s not a Dean of Students and an Assistant Head and all those things [that you would find at a larger independent school]...So now it is primarily social/emotional with some pieces of academic dean type of stuff.

Cameran works with teachers and students to understand their testing results and what accommodations are best for tackling specific academic deficiencies, but also social emotional issues; “helping kids work with teachers…. A lot of times it’s communication…kind of with the kids specifically, it will be like a kid will come in here and say like, you know like ‘this person hates me.’”

Thomas is a classroom science teacher who has been with Charleston School for 4 years. He has an undergraduate degree in science, and has taught students from sixth grade all the way through college in his 10 plus years of teaching. At Charleston he has become somewhat of an instructional coach for the Math and Science programs. Prior to being at Charleston, Thomas had some experience with students on the Autism spectrum:

I’ve worked with…a number of people on the spectrum, and I had taught kids on the spectrum…. I was aware of some of the learning challenges, and the, well, the communication challenges. So I think I had some idea of how difficult it would be, but not like, really a full grasp.

Patricia is the mother of a student with ASD who attends Charleston School. Patricia’s son has been at Charleston School since the sixth grade and is now a senior in high school. After her son had a hard time in other independent schools, Patricia and her family decided that a school that focused primarily on students with learning differences would be a better fit for him. She reported that the school
had a nice feel. [Charleston] School has a very nice feel for these kids. They belong somewhere…. I mean if there’s no stigma attached to whatever it is he has, no one talks about it, then you’re just like everybody else, aren’t ya?

**Emerged themes.**

**“Building strengths.”** Charleston School avoids addressing students’ specific weaknesses and instead builds learning plans around what each student does well and how they learn best. This approach forms the basis for most of the support programs at Charleston School. Shepard said,

> We describe ourselves as strength based, meaning we really try and focus on building strengths as opposed to remediating for weakness. With the thought that…students who come to us at the high school level have [had a] pretty traumatic schooling experience generally. So we operate on the mindset that if we’re focused on building their strengths up that their weaknesses will sort of self resolve.

This basic school philosophy appears to be well understood across levels of the organization, and even extends to the parent community. Patricia said, “I mean speaking to kids’ strengths works instead of doing all this remedial stuff for things they don’t excel in and making them feel miserable about themselves.” In the classroom, Thomas feels that weakness-based accommodations can distract a teacher from a student’s strengths; “When you’re told that a kid has severe reading issues, [some teachers are] going to only see that and going to fixate on that.”

The strengths-based approach permeates the culture of the school and extends into the process for creating learning plans and profiles. At Charleston, an educational therapist creates what they call a learning plan. This is a robust document that includes information on diagnosis, evaluation of all testing that has been done, addressing specific weaknesses a student may have, and some appropriate supports and accommodations, as well as social emotional strategies when necessary. Then, as the learning specialist, Shepard creates a snapshot document that provides a
simpler approach, one that mirrors the strengths based philosophy of the school. Cameran described the focus of the learning profile thusly; “So, it’s broken down to kind of like; here are where their strengths are, here are where their differences are.” Although teachers have access to both the learning plan and the learning profile, this profile cuts through some of the unnecessary information that a classroom teacher might not need or understand. It communicates strengths so that a teacher or advisor can provide support in the classroom that will encourage engagement and participation.

Regardless of their position inside or outside the school, each person at Charleston who was interviewed spoke of how the value placed on a student’s strengths guides the decisions made in how students are supported. Even though each person at Charleston had a different way of explaining the school’s philosophy on strength based accommodation, they all agreed it was an important part of what makes students feel included, known, and supported. As Cameran described the student’s feelings about their own academic struggles and support at school, “You know, you are what you are, but whatever you want people to know and see, and what feels good to you, great.”

“The bandwidth to be able to differentiate more.” Charleston maintains class sizes that are small, even by independent school standards. Average class size for high school level courses is 15 across the NAIS spectrum of independent schools (NAIS, 2019), whereas Charleston maintains class sizes that are commonly less than 10. The school’s philosophy of strength-based support is buttressed by small classes that allow teachers to have more time with each individual student in the classroom. The interview participants all offered small class sizes as the
explanation for how teachers could tailor instruction and activities to the more diverse population of students at Charleston. Shepard stated,

Well, it gives the teacher the bandwidth to be able to differentiate more,… The teacher can have like smaller groups, they can pull two kids aside and do something with them while six other kids are doing, you know, one other thing in a way that they wouldn’t be able to do if they had 15 or 20 kids.

The common belief is that small class sizes also aid in a teacher’s ability to assess and give feedback, from Shepard’s point of view;

They can more quickly provide feedback on graded material. Tests and papers and stuff like that tend to get feedback real fast cause the teacher might only have a caseload of 30. So that they can be much more responsive. They can be more responsive to parent requests in that way, too, because they just have more bandwidth.

From the parent’s perspective, Patricia says,

If there’s seven kids in a class, the teacher knows whether you know how to conjugate that verb and if you don’t, she’s going to help you do it. She’s going to help you learn how to do it. If you can’t figure out that calculus problem, they will figure out where you’re getting hung up. There’s 10 kids plus an assistant. It’s not like there’s 42 kids in a class or 38 or 33. The teacher knows what you know. It’s very hard to fake it at [Charleston]. Very hard.

Classes at Charleston tend to be anywhere from eight to 10 students on average. This is a large part of the support structure at Charleston, Shepard explained,

You know the small class sizes, right, and all that stuff is sort of like the baseline…. That largely has to do with sensory issues. Right. So just having smaller classes is sort of like, it’s not a high stress school environment, especially for an independent high school. So small class size, small school size, and low stress level. Those are sort of like baseline threshold things for kids on the spectrum. You know, that remove so many of the barriers that they face in a more typical school environment.

According to staff and faculty at Charleston, a clear benefit of smaller classes and a smaller school is, Cameran elaborates, “I get to work a lot one on one with them, two on one,
like small group stuff because our school is so small.” Small classes and groups allow staff and faculty the time and space with individual students, or small groups, to address issues specific to students on the spectrum. Cameran continued,

   We have the chance to talk about, like, more social emotional stuff like making eye contact, and handling criticism from other students or teachers, you know, the kind of stuff that you wouldn’t like, have time for in a larger setting.

   An advisory program supports the notion of small classes and close relationships. At Charleston, staff and faculty use the advisor and advisory program as a way to organize the support structure for each student. The advisor communicates home to parents, communicates common issues among teachers, and meets with students to help them catch up on late work, retest, or prepare for large assignments and exams. Patricia says, as a parent, the advisor helps her stay abreast of what is happening at school; “I get an overall report of how my child is doing socially and emotionally, how my child is relating to his peers and always with the emphasis of what can we do to help?"

   All ninth graders have advisory for an hour a day. Older students have advisory 3 days a week. Advisories tend to be about six students per group. After the ninth grade, students are most often given a new advisor for 10th grade, and then most often will stay with that advisor for the rest of high school. Advisory, coupled with small classes and social emotional support, make up the core of the support model at Charleston. Thomas reminded me, “The advisor is the hub.”

   “We have blanket accommodations here.” The specific strategies used in the classrooms at Charleston School follow a pattern that is common across independent schools, the use of extended time on assignments and tests, although not always the best idea, according to Cameran, “We have blanket accommodations here.” Beyond these blanket accommodations that
are afforded to most of the students at Charleston, Cameran explained that there are a lot of support strategies used in the classroom that she believes are designed specifically to support students on the spectrum; “We’re pretty good at allowing them to take breaks when they need to and when they’re feeling overwhelmed. They can like stand up and pace or they can have fidgets.” Additionally, teachers are encouraged to use redirection techniques and allow students who are struggling situationally to take a break in another room. When describing some of these strategies, Shepard said, “They really can get targeted assignments that are designed specifically for them. Some kids get more work, some kids get less work, some kids get harder work, some kids get easier work.” According to Shepard, instruction is individualized and differentiated; “There’s not a ton of whole group instruction.”

Teachers sometimes struggle to describe what that support looks like in concrete terms. For example, Thomas said, “Largely, well, all I’m doing is kind of leaving them with something smart and getting out of their way.” Thomas feels that most of what he does in his classroom is just good teaching; “Most times, so the thing is, the support I give them, sure it’s specific to them, but it would work with any student.” He feels that specific strategies are not necessary to support students on the spectrum.

You start with the student, you figure, you learn the student and then you try to build upon that. Like there’s, there’s nothing, that’s one of the myths that’s almost like, it’s there to sell books. You know, as in, if it works with autism spectrum kids, also worked with every other kid. You know, if you put a smart person in a room, you know, you consciously put together the environment.

For Patricia, as a parent, it is the less academic and more social emotional side of support in the classroom that she sees as important. At Charleston, students have the option to dig deep in
to the things that interest them. A teacher’s ability to allow students to spend more time on a particular subject that enables them to feel inspired lets her know that her son is being supported,

Well not that I doubted him academically, so let me see if I should rephrase it, he wrote a 36 page paper last year… and the assignment was seven pages. You know typical of a kid who’s, you know, really into it…. I mean he had it footnoted, he had it aligned, and because he really liked the topic and the teacher liked him and they worked together. And she even said to him…., “I’m really proud of you for doing it.”

“We can’t really know if what we’re doing is the best thing.” At Charleston, when it comes to evaluating the strategies being used and the basis upon which these strategies are chosen, there was no certainty among the staff and faculty interviewed. Once a learning plan or profile is in place, it is not clear who is responsible for evaluating the outcomes of the specific strategies and blanket accommodations that have been chosen. Shepard sees that evaluation as part of the high school principal’s job, but also he states, “I mean teachers obviously, and the high school principal is in classrooms a lot…. I mean we do a lot of self-study, in that way, but the principal of the high school is charged with that.” At Charleston, teachers write narrative report cards at the end of each term, and parents get a full grade report every 5 weeks, with about 20 different categories on which students get assessed. Shepard feels that this level of evaluation from teachers gives him a good idea of how students are doing; “[Austen], the high school principal and I, together, read through all the reports every 5 weeks so we have a pretty good idea of what’s going on with any one kid.”

For Cameran, an administrator, and Thomas, a teacher, it is more difficult for them to articulate how the outcomes of learning plans and profiles can be evaluated. Because the school has grown in size and the population is a high needs one with diverse diagnoses, Cameran said,
I think when you have 50 kids in the whole school, it’s much easier to know and remember what each kid has and doesn’t have and why there’s a specific time extension for a specific thing, whereas when you have 180 kids in the whole school, or 130 or whatever we’re at right now, it’s much more difficult and it unfortunately becomes a conversation about fairness and equity with students, with parents, [and] with teachers.

Cameran continued, “I think everyone [is responsible], but I don’t know that there’s, I would say that [Shepard] is probably, and the teachers, and I guess the high school principal is ultimately responsible.” Cameran went on to explain that although she does think that those who are responsible know they are responsible for evaluating outcomes, she worries; “I don’t know that they always take responsibility.” Although Thomas sees a great challenge in trying to evaluate outcomes when he feels that the population is very diverse, even amongst students on the spectrum,

I mean…we have way more kids and that’s part of the problem…. We’re just seeing… none of them are alike…they’re really just so different. I really hope that what we’re doing helps them…. I mean, we can’t admit this, but we can’t really know if what we’re doing is the best thing.

When asked if strategies suggested in the learning plans and profiles at Charleston are based on current evidence or research, Shepard explained,

We have a hard time with that in that our kids are often like, outside the realm of a lot of research. Like obviously there’s research about how to best meet the needs of kids who are on the spectrum, right…most of our kids are very high functioning spectrum students…. When we look at research, you know, it’s just our kids, like nobody is studying our kids.

Many staff and faculty members rely on the expertise of others in the community to let them know whether or not school-based plans and profiles are based on current research or evidence based practices. Shepard said,
I mean, [Austen], our High School Principal, has a Doctorate in Education, and is all about implementation of policy versus practice, so he has like, a very robust background in exactly that kind of a thing… and then [Craig.] the Head of School is also pulling things in, so we sort of try to piece together as much of that as we can.

None of the school’s staff and faculty that were interviewed discussed whether or not Austen (Head of Upper School) or Craig (Head of School) were part of the school’s process for creating learning plans and profiles, or whether their input was requested or obtained when strategies were discussed or implemented.

Cameran agreed that evaluating the basis on which certain strategies are chosen is something for which others in her school community are responsible, “I mean my guess is that Shepard does and [Austen] does the High School Principal… And like our Head of School is always sending us different articles about education and different populations.” Thomas, a classroom teacher, and Patricia, a parent, did not have any information to share about whether or not the strategies suggested in the learning plans and profiles were based in research. Patricia stated, “I’m not sure who looks at that, although I think a lot of what they do comes from the literature.”

“We definitely are not shy of hiring teachers who have no teaching experience.” When it comes to hiring teachers and providing professional development specific to students on the spectrum, Charleston buck every tradition. Shepard explained,

We definitely are not shy of hiring teachers who have no teaching experience…. It can be easier to train somebody to work with our kids who has never taught, than to untrain things someone has learned in a traditional school.

At Charleston, the philosophy is that traditional independent or public school teachers have unrealistic expectations, or “too much baggage” to work with a population of students all of
whom have learning differences. Charleston is not opposed to hiring teachers who are experienced. Shepard knows the value of a teacher with classroom management and instructional design experience, as well as a willingness to differentiate, but he stated that most independent school teachers are just not interested in the work they do at Charleston; “Independent school teachers are not really interested in working with our goofy kids, you know. They’re sort of ‘I want to work at Harvard/Westlake, and I wanna be in a prestigious school.’” Cameran went on to explain that most of the teachers they hire are have not had much experience teaching, but instead may have industry knowledge or “passion or interests” outside a classroom. Some of the teachers who are employed at Charleston have been college lecturers. Shepard described some of their teachers this way; “We have people who will come in from, like, industry and just want to move into teaching and don’t have any experience and we’re happy to train people in that way.” In addition to orientation, new teachers meet with Shepard every other week during their first semester. Shepard stated that he tries to build a cohort-style group to help them transition, and eventually support each other. He described the rest of the first year as “ad hoc,” with new teachers coming to see him when they need support.

Teachers at Charleston do not necessarily characterize orientation and training in the same way that administrators do, as Thomas revealed, “They had, like a week. A couple of meetings, professional development, um, just kind of the usual teaching ridiculous crap, and then we just met the kids for three days of activities.”

Charleston provides a traditional week of “back to school” training and professional development for all of their staff and faculty. According to Shepard, new teachers have some additional orientation over the summer:
When somebody new comes in, they’ll come in several times in the summer, if they’ve been hired early, and Austen, the high school principal or I will work with them on what should differentiation look like in the classroom. [Chelsea], the educational therapist, who develops the learning plans, will give them an overview about the needs of our students, including spectrum students.

Cameran described some of the training in terms of:

Kind of what you’re going to see in the classroom, with what behaviors are going to pop up and what typically can be done about them. Here’s a range of things that you can do for outbursts, children crying in the corner. Like those types of things and also, you know, mandatory child abuse stuff, like what is child abuse, what is suspected child abuse, like, you know, who is a mandated reporter.

Charleston provides ongoing professional development for returning teachers as well.

Cameran described this process thusly;

We have faculty meetings AAALLLLL the time… We have one every five weeks, like a day long one every 5 weeks. But I don’t know how much is advancing professional development stuff versus management of grading and that kind of stuff.

At the end of each 5-week term, advisors write their narrative reports for all students. According to Shepard, this “day of report writing” is also used for grade level meetings, professional development, and sometimes student specific meetings, when necessary.

The Charleston school offers a lot of flexibility at the classroom level for teachers to decide how to or how not to support students in the classroom. Shepard explained that teachers can decide how to structure their classroom, their curriculum, and their instruction, depending on “what works well for them.” This can make it difficult to know what is and what is not working.

There’s a lot of variation in terms of what it [support in the classroom] looks like…it’s often difficult to describe how we operate because it’s so ad hoc and so per student because our kids all have such individual needs.
“How is he even going to get into college?” Even in a school whose mission is to support students with learning differences, like Charleston School, the burden of college preparation and parent expectations can take their toll. As Shepard described it,

Ah the notion of college readiness. You know it’s just like, there’s such a rigid sort of definition of what it means to be college ready, especially with [independent school] parents who will come in and you know we describe ourselves as college prep. Which we have to, and I firmly believe that we do provide a lot of college prep, but it looks pretty different and it’s for our kids, and it looks different on a case by case basis.

College preparedness or “college prep” is a big part of the greater independent school culture. As discussed in Chapter Two, most parents choose an independent school for reasons of safety and academic rigor. Although Charleston may provide education to students who are traditionally marginalized in higher education, that does not seem to have diminished the “college prep” expectations of parents. When students struggle, Cameran said,

Their kid gets a C on a paper and it’s like, “Oh my gosh.” It’s, you know, a C. Or if they fail something and then they’re like, “Well no, I need my kid to be able to re-do that.”

As Patricia explained, from a parent’s perspective, even when you have a deep gratitude for what the school is doing,

I had a lot of difficulty when he first came ‘cause I kept thinking, well it’s a sweet little school, but are they learning anything? I mean, I was the queen of oh my god, this is really great, but this kid isn’t going to know anything. How is he ever going to get into college? What have we done?

Case Two: York School

Overview. York School is an independent kindergarten through high school. York is a traditional independent school, which means that they are a mission driven school, governed by a board of trustees, that provides academically rigorous, college preparatory curriculum in a
private school setting. York School is situated West of Long Beach in the area of Southern California, and is surrounded by a large population of socio-economically upper-middle and lower-upper class families. York School does not specifically recruit students with learning differences, but they are developing systems and processes for supporting students with special needs.

York School was established in the first half of the 20th century, and has grown steadily over the years, currently serving over 900 students in their three divisions: elementary, middle, and high school. York School has approximately 400 students in their high school division. Of those students, eight to 10% are identified as having learning plans, and of the 30-40 students with learning plans, less than half are on the autism spectrum. The purpose of this study was to understand how schools are supporting students on the autism spectrum in high school; however, because York School is fairly new at supporting students on the spectrum, especially in the high school grades, two of the three interviewees were professionals who work with younger students at York. Next year, York will be adding a learning specialist just for the high school, a position that did not previously exist. There are two school psychologists, one for social emotional and behavior issues, and one for academic issues.

York School personnel involved in this study were unable to find a parent of a student on the spectrum who was willing to be interviewed. Staff and faculty who were approached to assist in connecting parents with the study all reported that parents were reticent to participate because they either were worried about their child being identified in the study as needing accommodations or being on the spectrum, or that feedback they gave would impact their relationship with the school.
Sonja is a learning specialist who has been at York School for a little less than 3 years. She serves students in several divisions at York and most of her experience has been with students in the lower grades. However, Sonja has been working with school personnel to develop the systems and processes that will be expanded to the high school, so she was a useful interview subject for this study. Sonja has a Master’s Degree in Educational Therapy and was previously a reading specialist, starting her career working with students who have reading disorders.

Sonja has multiple roles as a learning specialist at York. First, she writes learning plans for students who are eligible for accommodations, once they have been evaluated by a psychologist. She also organizes meetings with parents, teachers, and outside support professionals. Of outside support professionals, she stated, “I collaborate with the outside support to make sure we’re supporting the students in the classroom properly.” She also coaches and provides support to teachers. She is clear that she does not provide pullout services, such as one-to-one support outside the classroom during classes. She does, however, push in for support, which means she works in the classroom with small groups of students while the teacher conducts lessons with the rest of the class.

Luann has a Master’s Degree in Clinical Psychology and has been with York School for just under 10 years. Before that, Luann worked in special education in a public school district. Her experience in both public school and private school made her a valuable interview subject in this study.

Luann’s role at York is twofold. She is both a school counselor and the Dean of Student Support. She oversees social emotional, behavioral, and academic support, as well as acting as a “case manager” when it comes to coordinating with professionals outside the school community.
For example, she communicates to parents when a professional evaluation may be needed. York has a team of people who are part of the support process, including teachers, specialists, parents, and advisors. But ultimately, Luann said, “I am the one that oversees that team.”

Bethenny is a high school teacher at York School. Having come to the United States from overseas, her background was not in teaching. Inspired by a family member who was a teacher and experiencing difficulty finding employment, she decided to go back to school to earn her Master’s Degree. She now holds two Master’s Degrees, one in a world language, and one in Cross Cultural Teaching. Bethenny enjoys teaching, stating, “this is good, this is fulfilling.” She has been teaching at York School for around 5 years.

Bethenny teaches students with a diverse set of diagnoses, including autism, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and executive function disorder (EFD). Students on the spectrum do not make up a large percentage of the students she teaches each year, but supporting students with learning differences has become somewhat of a passion for her. She stated, “I read, I watch everything that I can get my hands on to be a better teacher to those kids who have some extra needs.”

Emerged themes.

“There were not formal structures in place for the support of kids.” Of the three schools studied, York School is newest to supporting students with learning differences, and is just beginning to consciously formalize and expand their support to students in the high school. Luann recalled, “We always had outlier kids and then everyone was kind of scrambling, you know, to help them.” According to Luann, the learning specialist role ten years ago was different, “it was more hands on, it was more about push-in or pullout support.” Push-in and pullout
support most commonly take the form of a learning specialist or assistant teacher pushing in to
the classroom, working with a small group of students in the back while the classroom teacher
continues to teach their lesson to the rest of the whole group. In upper grades, such as high
school, pullout would be more common; a learning specialist may work with a small group in a
classroom during lunch or oversee the testing of students before or after school. However, this
model of support becomes more and more difficult as the number of students needing support
increases.

When asked whether or not the number of students needing accommodations has
increased, all participants from York School agreed that it has. According to Sonja, the school is
“just starting to kind of get acquainted with more of the learning differences.” She went on to
say, “I think it is a growing number actually. We were, I was just talking to Luann about this and
how in the last 2 years [I have been here] it’s really grown.” Luann agreed, stating, “The
numbers are definitely changing, and we are seeing more students who need support, so we need
the structures in place.” From the teacher’s perspective, Bethenny offered, “I feel like we,
historically we’ve been a school for very high achieving kids, but we have a diverse population
now and we do have many more students who have different kinds of needs.”

More recently the school is working toward formalizing the process of supporting
students with learning differences in the classroom. Although they have had more experience in
the lower grades with their learning specialist model, they still lacked codified policies and
recommendations for how the process of creating learning plans and implementing them in the
classroom should work.
"We have had a slippery slope the past few years." In talking about the "ad hoc" methods that have been used to support students who are on the spectrum or have learning differences, Luann said, “This year, Sonja devised some protocols that we want to put in place and it’s being written into our, you know, K-12 wellness team policy and procedures.”

According to Luann, the formalization process in the lower grades started about 5 years ago. A new director was hired and at that time they began to put more structure in place. However, this formalization has not made it all the way into the upper grades.

As the team in the lower grades has begun to formalize it, the process begins with a student being evaluated outside of the school by a professional educational psychologist. The psychologist writes up the full report, usually called an “ed psych” (educational-psychological), report, based on the testing they have done, and the family provides that report to the school. When asked if all students who have learning plans have had a full evaluation, Luann said, “We have had a slippery slope the past few years, which is why we decided to more formalize [the process].” Requiring an ed-psych report means asking families to pay a great deal of money to a specialist, usually in the range of $3,000-$5,000. The alternative to that protocol is to request testing through the local public school district. Although this option is free, it can take far more time, sometimes several months to a year, for the entire process to be completed.

Parents, teachers, the learning specialist, school counselors, and outside professionals, such as the psychologist who conducted the ed-psych evaluation, are all involved in the creation of learning plans at York. Luann stated, “In our switch to a collaborative team model, when we create the ILP, we do invite everyone to our table…. It can be a big meeting, like an IEP meeting.” An IEP is a learning plan used in the public school, and is often the result of a battery
of tests conducted by several different education professionals who are all asked to participate in the final meeting where the IEP is codified. An IEP meeting can often include 10-15 different people.

As a result of the financial and logistical difficulty of getting a student evaluated, York decided that the best way to roll out the new requirement was to give families a warning that these changes were coming. The goal, as Luann explained it, is to have a school policy where students can receive what she calls “informal differentiation or accommodation.” This informal support might simply be agreed upon and communicated by the teacher to parents, or from the support team to the teacher and family, and include elements such as extra time on assessments or assignments, less content for homework, etc. Luann clarified, “We decided that third grade would be the cut off where we can do differentiation without a formal plan…because third grade is where all the kids take…standardized testing.”

The importance of these tests is not lost on any school administrators, so the process by which students access the test is important. For students with learning differences, getting accommodations on these tests is a rigorous process that requires the school to submit all testing that has been conducted for the students and the school learning plan, as well as a detailed explanation of how the student is accommodated in the classroom and the history of that support. Without approval from the Educational Records Bureau (ERB), College Board, or the American College Testing (ACT) organization, a student cannot access those tests with accommodations. According to Luann, “they cannot get accommodations formally for that ERB test, which is in the spring, unless they have a full eval in place and they qualify with a diagnosis.” Independent schools use the test results of standardized tests to market themselves, so ensuring that each
student produces their best work on these tests is of utmost concern. Parents are also concerned with the results of standardized tests, as they can have an impact on whether their child can matriculate to another independent school or college. These potential consequences make a strong case for the school to use in order to help parents understand the importance of having a formalized accommodations plan. Schools that fall into the traditional independent day school ideal, like York, must consider how the college admissions process can be affected by these different obstacles for students who are not neurotypical and require support, and how to have difficult conversations with parents about the benefits of codifying a support plan.

“It’s at the discretion of the teacher – are they interested or are they not.” York School uses a model of support that Luann described as a “case management” model, where rather than learning specialists pushing in or pulling out, teachers are responsible for managing accommodations from day to day, based on the learning plans that learning specialists provide. Luann explained, “The biggest difference is we don’t provide services.” Teachers are expected to carry most of the responsibility of supporting students on the spectrum in the upper grades. However, since York has not formalized the support structure in the high school, the level of support a student might have will vary widely from teacher to teacher. Luann and Sonja said that teachers are mostly responsible for implementing and evaluating the learning plan in the classroom, but as far as Bethenny is aware,

It’s at the discretion of the teacher – are they interested or are they not. And if they’re not, they’re fine. Nobody’s going to force them to do anything because I think that up to now, people were thinking that it was the job of the person that was like the counselor or learning specialist.
Luann agreed; “We have some teachers that are able to accommodate a little bit more robustly than others, right, and then some teachers that are just tired of it.” According to Sonja, the basic process is, “Once the ILP is created, and we do that based on the psychologist’s reports and recommendations, and parent input and teacher input, then, I write that up and that is given to teachers to implement in the classroom.” Although the goal is for the process to be shared, according to Luann, teachers are expected to be responsible for implementing the ILP because “they’re the point person” in the classroom. “Yes, the teacher is ultimately responsible,” she said. It happens “on collaboration with the learning specialist. So the learning specialist might give them more strategies and tools that they haven’t tried yet, etc.” Bethenny agreed that teachers are responsible for implementation, but is concerned about outcomes and accountability; “Well, I’m expected to follow the, you know, recommendations, but nobody follows up on that.” When asked about the responsibility of evaluating outcomes of learning plans, teachers like Bethenny were not aware that they are responsible. Bethenny stated, “Well, I would say, the school psychologist that we had was the person in charge of all the ILPs, so her.” Learning plans are created in a collaborative environment and initiated and organized by the learning specialist, but once they are communicated to the teacher and the student enters the classroom, Sonja said, “There is no formal process of going to evaluate whether the teachers are implementing it. But we do really trust our teachers so much and they are very highly qualified.”

“Blanket all the way.” York’s learning plan starts with highlighting a student’s strengths in the hope that teachers will tailor assignments and assessments to a student’s preferred mode of learning, or their best form of demonstrating knowledge. York’s plan also lists a student’s weaknesses and provides a list of suggested accommodations. However, their learning plans
show a blanket approach when it comes to suggested strategies for teaching in the classroom.

When asked what were the more common strategies used at York School, Luann mentioned, “extra time, check for understanding, you know, school home communication…less content, less amount of work.” Sonja described some of the strategies suggested to teachers:

- Definitely giving students extended time to complete assignments. Scaffolding, breaking assignments down for students. Giving students enough breaks to go get water, um, just get up and move around a little bit. Using fidgets if needed.

These recommendations do not reach the students in the upper grade classrooms, instead, according to Bethenny, the accommodations are “Blanket all the way.” She feels that all of the learning plans that are made available to her seem to have all the same suggested strategies, regardless of the student’s learning profile. She noted,

- It’s not that they’re not useful, it’s that they’re not ah, they’re not enough. So when, you know, we’re told, “Ok give that kid preferential seating, seat them next to you because they can not be distracted.” Yeah, it’s it’s a step in the right direction, but that’s not enough.

“I’ve tried to learn on my own how to help them.” For most schools, York included, the professional development and training of teachers is built around the annual school schedule. New teachers attend the orientation and training that occurs before the school year starts. Returning teachers at York also attend back-to-school trainings and meetings. However, according to Sonja, training or professional development focused on supporting students on the spectrum, or students with other learning differences, is not a part of these back-to-school orientations and trainings. Sonja stated, “We don’t have any formal orientation or training for that.” Moreover, if a teacher is unfortunate enough to start after the school year has started, there is even less of a chance for any training or support, as Bethenny explained; “it was a steep
learning curve. It was ah, pretty crazy.” Bethenny did report having weekly or bi-weekly meetings with the Dean of Students, but this was not to help her with the support of students with ASD so much as “it was really related to deadlines and this is what your year’s going to look like and you need to be able to turn in your comments by this day, here’s our format for parent/teacher conferences.”

At York School, the communication around students with learning plans and the support of teachers in the classroom takes the form of regular staff meetings or student support meetings. Sonja says,

What we usually do is we’ll have that very first student support meeting where we will discuss all of our students who have learning plans and more informally, just talk about students and what they need and what, um, strategies teachers can use in the classroom with them.

There are some opportunities for Sonja to foster professional development within the school community, but as Luann shared, “We’re always vying for faculty meeting time.” When Sonja is able to get into classrooms, she does her best to get some faculty training in at the same time; “I have done some trainings on running an effective guided reading, on differentiation, on just supporting students with certain accommodations and what that might look like in the classroom.” However, almost all of the direct trainings for teachers on how to support students with learning differences, “You know, are typically done in our student support meetings, which we have once per month.” Luann pointed out that they have had specific training around specific issues in the past,

Depending on what Sonja and I feel the needs of our community are, in years past we’ve had occupational therapists come in…and you know explain, “Why is this kid more wriggly” and what a teacher can you do that’s a classroom intervention without a full evaluation or learning plan…. And we’ve had a behavior analyst come in and talk about
behavior and the different functions of a child’s behavior and what kinds of interventions can we do.

However, as Bethenny pointed out, these trainings are often optional. When asked if there is any requirement for her to participate in these professional development offerings, she replied, “Absolutely not.” She feels that not nearly enough time is spent preparing teachers, and it affects students:

It makes me really upset and so I try, I’ve tried to learn on my own how to help them pretty much. So I read, I watch everything that I can get my hands on to be a better teacher to those kids who have some extra needs.

Again, Bethenny pointed out that there are opportunities for teachers who seek them out. York will pay for some professional development but teachers are allowed to choose what trainings they attend. Some teachers, like Bethenny, choose specific training that will help her serve students with ASD. However, in Bethenny’s opinion, most do not.

“We want to make sure we can support whoever we have here.” As discussed in Chapter Two, NAIS (2016) best practices suggest that schools should not ask potential students or families about learning differences or past experiences needing academic support or accommodation. In this way, Luann said, you do not always know which students will need support, or what kind of support they may need. “You can’t ask, you know, if they’ve ever had any kind of support in their previous school in any way because we also want to be careful that we’re not ruling out kids just because of a diagnosis either.”

There is a tension between the needs of the school to enroll students and the school’s ability to support all students who are admitted. Luann explained,

We want to make sure we can support whoever we have here – diagnosis of anything or not. And, we’re not really adequately equipped like a typical public school is. You know
and we need to know that. And then sometimes admissions has, you know, their need to fill seats, as well.

This tension between the needs of admissions and the needs of students can mean that best practice has to be ignored. Luann spelled out this tension:

The folks that are in the admissions office, or the interviewers, or if they’re in a group interview and they notice something that might be off – might not be neurotypical and might say, “Hey Luann can you take a look at this child’s file – can you take a peek at this child when he or she comes back?” So then my red flag might rise and I might say, “Can we ask this parent if they’ve ever had a psych eval?”

Everyone in the York School community who is involved in the support of students on the spectrum and other students with learning difference, feels this tension. Bethenny feels it in her classroom:

I think she [the school counselor], has like a big load and I don’t know that honestly what we’ve been doing up until now has been very efficient and that has been very frustrating because to me, we’re doing a disservice to our students who are not typical.

For Sonja, it is about the quality of support the school can offer:

I think having buy-in from the whole community, the people who control the finances, to see if they’re willing to commit to really supporting the kids that we have and if we can’t support these kids, then we have to really take a look at our admissions process… ‘cause it’s really not fair to the kids if we’re not able to provide support.

Case Three: Beverly School

Overview. Beverly School is a traditional, independent day school in the greater San Diego area. Beverly School is a school that serves students in middle and high school and, like most independent schools, considers itself an academically rigorous, college preparatory school. Although Beverly school is a newer institution, it has grown quickly and is now rather large for
an independent school, with close to 90 students per grade in the middle school division, and 110 students per grade in the high school division.

Beverly School has a three-person support team. The support team serves a population that encompasses about 20% of the total middle and high school student population, or about 130 students. Of those students, a small percentage are on the spectrum. The support team consists of two student support specialists, one of whom is a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), and the other of whom is the Director of the Learning Center. Although Beverly School has worked hard to create a learning center in order to support the student population that requires accommodations, Beverly is new to supporting students with learning differences, having just started to build their program 5 years ago.

Lisa has been with Beverly School for the past 8 years. She was a full time teacher until five years ago when she was appointed the principal of the high school. Lisa holds a Bachelor’s Degree and a Master’s Degree in Social Science. Lisa has been the administrator who oversees the development of support programs for the high school grades. When she began as an administrator at Beverly, she said, “Our responses to student support were, pretty, you know, sort of like catch as catch can.”

As Lisa began her new job as the high school principal, she began working with Kyle, a learning specialist who was starting her first year at Beverly:

We knew that we needed sort of someone who wasn’t just responding to issues or trying to like, take care of business. We needed sort of a larger vision. And [Kyle]…when she came on she ended up…taking on the lead of thinking about how to build a real program that wasn’t just responding to crisis and wasn’t just sort of doing the bureaucratic due diligence, that was really about thinking about how we provide guidance and training to teachers for all different kinds of support that they can give students and those kinds of things. Sort of sitting back and saying we’re creating sort of a whole learning community.
Kyle came to Beverly School about 5 years ago, at the same time that Lisa was transitioning into administration. Kyle has a Master’s degree in Counseling and was hired to be a learning specialist. She brought to Beverly several years of experience in student support. Kyle is now the Director of what Beverly School calls their Learning Center. Kyle considers her role to be: “To help support the students, families and our community, teachers, and students in understanding learning differences and accommodations. How best to support students. I work with students both on the academic side and on the social/emotional side.”

Kyle initially began with a caseload of about 25 students, which at that time represented about 10% of the student population. Now Kyle has a caseload of close to 130 students. She says fewer than 10% of those students are on the autism spectrum. However, Kyle feels that students on the spectrum are a growing population. Although Kyle and Lisa, with the help of Mauricio, the LCSW, and a new learning specialist, Denise, started to get the learning center on track, Lisa said, “By the time we had really built the team, we really felt like we were sort of behind. We weren’t doing what we needed to do to support kids and it was definitely around things like autism spectrum.”

Ken is currently a classroom English teacher at Beverly School. Ken has a Bachelor’s Degree in English Literature. He had worked at two other independent schools, and then came to Beverly School when the school first opened. At that time, Ken was an administrator, the Director of School Life, which “meant that I was in charge of everything that wasn’t classroom, or curriculum. So I was student support, student discipline, student life, parents association, nursing office. Um, transportation, parking, all of that stuff.” In this capacity, Ken was fully
immersed in the process of creating a student support program at Beverly. Ken was instrumental in hiring Kyle, the Learning Specialist, and about that he said, “One of my crowning achievements was hiring her, you know. If I did nothing else at this school, I got Kyle here.” The school counselor, Mauricio, was also hired around that time, and he and Kyle became the basis on which the student support program was built. Ken left Beverly School for a few years, but recently returned as a classroom teacher in order to take a break from the duties of administration.

Yolanda is the parent of Harry, who is on the autism spectrum, and a high school student at Beverly School. Harry was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3, and has been in independent schools since he began school. Yolanda said, “So, kindergarten, we chose our schools really based on the fit of how they would, basically, cater or fit with a child who is on the spectrum.” Harry attended the same independent school from the time he was in kindergarten until he completed the sixth grade. After that, Yolanda and her family looked for a school where Harry could finish his schooling, with the hope that he would stay from the seventh grade through high school graduation. According to Yolanda, they chose Beverly because, “They very much teach to the individual, diagnosed or not. I mean that’s their philosophy for all kids, typical and not.”

At Beverly School, all of the interview subjects were clear that the philosophy of the school included the idea that every student should receive individual attention and support, regardless of whether they were “typical” or not. An individualized and inclusive approach to education is not necessarily unique in the world of independent schools. Small class sizes, advisory programs, and access to extra teacher support are hallmarks of independent education. However, it is clear from the words of the subjects interviewed that at Beverly, these are not
words in the service of marketing, but rather are part of a cultural norm that is learned and understood by all constituents. As Kyle said, “I find our community to be very inclusive by intention.” Lisa summed up this idea when she said,

We really intentionally talk about the fact that in order to create an inclusive classroom environment, we have to be aware that people are coming from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, some of which are highly sort of visible, and some of which are not.

**Emerged themes.**

*The kinds of student support we had up to that point had been fire fighting.* About 5 years ago, Beverly School made a conscious decision to improve their ability to support students with learning differences. When the school was still relatively new, members of the school administration, including Ken, had noticed a growing need for additional student support. In the first years of the school, there was a school psychologist who would take EdPsych reports from private therapists, or IEPs from the public school district, and create a learning plan with suggested supports. However, this is primarily where the support ended. There was not a robust program or process that provided guidance to classroom teachers, or professional development to the staff and faculty. As Lisa described their student support work at the time, “The kinds of student support we had up to that point, had been um, fire fighting.” Kyle concurred, “It’s kinda, everybody kinda dabbled a bit.” Before Kyle was hired, there was some after school support where students could get extra help, and teachers volunteered to be there and assist, but this was not set up to support students individually in the ways they might need; it was more of a “study hall.” These types of support are the more common ways that independent schools might support “typical” students who are struggling, rather than targeted support for students on the spectrum.
Then Kyle was brought on board and she “was hired more as a learning specialist to coordinate accommodations for students at school.”

Once Kyle came on board at Beverly, it was obvious to her and others in school leadership that there was a growing population of students who needed more support than what was being offered. When asked whether her being a part of the community was an attractor for families looking for an inclusive environment for their students on the spectrum, Kyle said,

I think after bringing me on I think that the community sort of felt more comfortable with self-disclosure. So I found that there were a lot of existing families already here that were in need of support for their child that we ended up kind of finding out about as a result of my being here.

However, Yolanda insisted that Kyle’s work at Beverly is a big part of why her family chose Beverly School; “She’s fantastic. I can’t say enough great things about her, and the whole team really. We met her before we started, and it was like, a big part of it [their reason for choosing Beverly].”

Initially, as part of the leadership staff, Kyle and Lisa started to brainstorm what more could be offered. Kyle said, “It was really an effort to support those students and try and come up with a system of support for students after school.” Since then, however, the support structure has grown to be a full program that is referred to as the learning center. A physical space was created, and in this space, the support team members can administer extended time tests, perform tutoring or other academic support practices, or conduct meetings with students on social-emotional issues. Kyle also explained that having this space offers the support team a place to work together and meet, keeping them connected, and allowing an almost constant flow of communication. As the program grows, this “constant communication” is important; “I see our
model now sort of going from being very new and figuring out what the school needs to sort of now implementing and driving what the school needs and being more proactive in our approach, rather than reactive.”

“**We’re creating a whole learning community.**” Beverly School’s support program is built on a team approach to student support. Beyond the three-person support team consisting of Kyle, the director of the program, a learning specialist, Mauricio, the licensed clinical social worker, and Denise, another learning specialist, there is another group who becomes part of the larger support team. Lisa described this approach as the result of necessity for a growing population; “when I first started in administration here, we had almost no student support of any kind.” As that population grew, “Not a lot of outside expertise in how to support kids, beyond just sort of like what we knew as teachers and not um a whole lot of sort of support beyond just that.” The main team of specialists who would normally be a part of a support team—like learning specialists, counselors, or teachers—are joined by other adults in the community, including coaches, athletic directors, and the school nurse. Lisa explained that not only does this result in a better support structure, but it also distributes the responsibility to more people in the community and helps keep costs of providing individual support down.

Beverly School has an advisory program, as well as what they call grade level teams. Each grade level has a dean whose role is to hold meetings with grade level teachers and advisors and create a space for discussion about curriculum, materials, communication, and other logistical issues that come up in the day-to-day operations of a school. However, this grade level team also comes together to have specific conversations about students needing support. According to Ken, there are two 45-minute grade level meetings each week: one for the more
logistical issues, like homework and grading, and one for discussion specifically about students’ progress. Grade-level teams might have conversations about a student who is struggling because of a personal issue, such as the loss of a family member or pet, but they also offer a space for teachers to discuss problems students may be having socially or academically in the classroom.

Lisa and Kyle both explained that teachers often discover from their teams that a student is struggling not just in their class, but also in other classes as well. Ken explained that these are the meetings where often it becomes clear that a student who has not yet been identified as needing support is in need of a closer look; “I mean the teachers are on the front line of identification.”

As the high school principal, Lisa sits in on some of the grade level meetings. When she does not, the assistant head of the school attends; “The idea is, we’re talking about all of our students on the regular, and talking about how we can support them in whatever ways they need… We’re creating a whole learning community.”

From a parent’s perspective, Yolanda feels this team approach gives her peace of mind to know that her son Harry is being supported throughout the school community, and that all the adults are working as a team:

I think the biggest thing is their communication with each other… they are very quick. Look, if I tell [Kyle] at 7:30 in the morning [Harry’s] having a bad day, he will go to his first period and... she [Kyle] will already have talked to [the teacher] and said, “Hey [Harry’s] having a little trouble this morning, you know, keep on the lookout and maybe we can talk about it.” They will both get back to me that afternoon and say, “Harry did great,” or “[Harry] had a little bit of a challenge here,” you know let me know how it worked…. So, there’s an ongoing support all the time, I mean, a line of communication all day long if we need it.

Kyle’s learning center support team integrates with the grade level team, and will attend meetings when there are discussions about students with more formal academic or social
emotional needs. In addition, the learning support team regularly meets with and consults with the school’s athletic trainer and nurse to create a larger support structure that can address ancillary issues for students on the spectrum or with learning differences. For instance, hygiene can sometimes be an issue for students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, a support plan item that includes education around hygiene is being supported by the school’s entire adult community. This integrated network is overseen by the director for school life, who, according to Lisa, “really gets to work with that team, and think about how that incorporates into larger school life experience” not only for students on the spectrum, but for all students in the community. This team approach provides the infrastructure for early identification of students on the spectrum, or other students who have come into the school without a formal diagnosis or stated need.

“A lot of the support we’re ending up providing… is training for teachers.” Although most schools have a variety of back to school meetings and trainings, Beverly’s daunting 2 weeks of engagements for teachers prior to the opening of the school year is long, even by independent school standards. Kyle explained that during this 2-week orientation for teachers, they cover a lot of ground. Beverly School has a discussion-based curriculum. This means that all classes are taught around a large table, and students are expected to engage in conversation throughout each class in every course. The first 2 weeks of training and orientation include professional development designed to familiarize teachers with this style of instruction. Discussion-based instruction poses its own difficulties for students on the autism spectrum, as well as for other students with learning differences. A lot of the training that the support team does with teachers at the beginning of the year focuses on how to adapt some of the discussion-based techniques to all students.
In addition to specific discussion-based strategies, the support team gives a presentation to all teachers. Kyle explained,

We talk through the majority of the accommodations that we would offer. The ones that come up the most for students, and we talk through what is this going to look like in the classroom… We had teachers share their examples with each other on what they use to sort of meet [those needs].

When there are fewer new teachers, Kyle meets with them separately, to do this training with them directly, rather than with the whole staff.

Learning specialists Kyle and Mauricio also give professional development throughout the year, mostly based on the needs they see from term to term. Kyle said,

This year we noticed just a really big trend in our ninth grade team. A lot of frustration around kids with ADHD and a lot of behavioral concerns in the classroom. So we spent some time doing a hands on training around ADHD and support strategies and how to navigate building that rapport with ADHD kids.

According to Kyle, that training was popular, so the team expanded it to the higher grade levels; “I think we’re getting better at sort of identifying trends within each specific challenge.”

For Ken, the support and training from the learning center team is invaluable, and what he appreciates about the way they provide support to teachers in the classroom is that they deliver information about how a specific kid utilizes accommodation, in addition to what the actual accommodation is. He said,

So this kid qualifies for extra time, but there isn’t a chance in hell you’re going to get her to leave class to go to the learning center to take it because she will not be differentiated from her peers.
The team helps teachers create their own processes for supporting individual students. If a student is not comfortable with additional time during the course of a class, they can start in the learning center and come to class late, perhaps with the excuse of having had an appointment.

From the administrative perspective, Lisa agreed that the more professional development you can offer teachers, the better. She explained that only when teachers feel comfortable in supporting students in the classroom can the team be fully effective. Ken agreed. Although he feels that he is better than others at coming up with creative strategies to support students, it is the expertise of the team in the learning center that gives him the confidence to know that his efforts are on the right track of how best to support students. Lisa said that when teachers have the tools, the success of student support increases; “A lot of the support we’re ending up providing that I think is really meaningful is training for teachers.”

“They did all the things, there was a plan and a process.” Beverly School has worked intentionally to create a team support structure that strives to address the individual needs of all of their students, not just students on the spectrum or with learning differences. However, they have also very intentionally planned the support structure for students who struggle. Lisa explained that the three-person support team in the learning center has a diverse set of experiences and skills that allows them to address more than just accommodations in the classroom:

One of them focuses more than anything else on counseling around social emotional support. And the two others focus primarily on academic support, but again they have a lot of crossover. Particularly, the academic support people cross very comfortably and easily into counseling. They all have a strong background.
These three support team members also split their time between the middle and high school, although Lisa said,

One of the three works most closely with the middle school, and the other two work more with high school, cause we’re, much bigger in the high school. But they all, they all share a lot with each other. They work really closely together.

Kyle is primarily responsible for creating the learning profiles that are communicated to teachers. She takes the official learning plans, which tend to be a report of the ed-psych findings from testing, includes the diagnosis and the recommendations for formal accommodations, and creates what the school calls a student profile. The student profile includes the formal accommodations, sometimes referred to as the “blanket accommodations” for which a student qualifies, like reduced work, extended time, and preferential seating, it also includes what Kyle described as:

Background information, strengths, and weaknesses. So for example, for a student on the spectrum, we may detail out what behaviors a teacher may see, more for that student than others. What strategies will work best for the student, that are specific to that student.

The process of managing and updating the learning plans and student profiles is not as efficient as Kyle would like; “We used to update them every year, but now that we’re over 100 students that we’re supporting, we’ve gone to every 2 years unless a student kind of demonstrates a need.” She went on to explain that, given their caseload, it simply is not possible to make those changes every year. Although they may not be able to formally update the documentation each year, according to Ken, the team of adults, including the advisor and the grade level teams, addresses each student’s need, each and every year.

Yolanda emphasized that the support that Kyle and Mauricio provide to Harry is a good example of how the team support model can be used to support students on the spectrum.
Harry started at school, he had an opportunity to walk through his class schedule, to see what his daily routine would be, and to meet his teachers. However, more importantly, he had an opportunity to write about some of his previous classroom experiences and share what some of his triggers may be. In this way, teachers have the opportunity to really understand what some sensory and social triggers might do to Harry, and be able to adjust and support him through the learning process in the classroom. Harry also meets with Mauricio for coaching related to social emotional struggles. They work on strategies for making friends, navigating social situations like group projects in the classroom, and addressing more personal topics such as hygiene and repetitive self-stimulatory behaviors, all common struggles for students on the autism spectrum.

The support team also interfaces with Harry’s outside of school support team, which includes private therapists. Yolanda elaborated,

[Harry] has his own academic support outside of school, as well as a behavioral therapist that he sees once a month… and so I know that all four [Mauricio, Kyle and the two outside providers] of them have gotten together and the school has reached out to [Harry’s] private support to make sure that they are coordinating his care.

The team support model seems to be working for Harry, and Yolanda agreed, “They did all the things, there was a plan and a process. It wasn’t like this is the first time they’d ever seen a child on the spectrum who needed support.”

“It doesn’t lend itself to a multimodal approach.” Beverly School uses a discussion-focused curriculum utilizing round tables. Teachers and the support team have learned that some students with ASD are less comfortable with this style of instruction. As a result, many of the more blanket strategies that might be suggested on a learning plan are not as effective in this situation. For instance, extended time or preferential seating is not something that can be applied
to a round table, discussion-based interaction in the classroom. Additionally, at a round table setup, there is no place for a student to “hide” when he/she needs to be under the radar in order to calm down or take a break from conversational stimulation. In these cases, teachers like Ken tend to allow their students to “TAB” or take a break and go for a quick run to the restroom or drinking fountain. Kyle clarified, “You know, certainly kids with auditory processing challenges who are extremely introverted can struggle, and while there’s a variety of different styles in the classroom, I think it [the round table], doesn’t lend itself to a multimodal approach.”

Beyond the instructional style of the classroom, Beverly School uses other common blanket accommodations for their students with ASD, such as providing written lesson notes (either from the teacher or a student volunteer), and encourages teachers to meet with students after class to review verbally what was discussed and follow up with any questions a student may have. However, Ken says he tries to employ a variety of techniques that might be more helpful for ASD students in particular. One of the most useful supports that he uses with his students with ASD is what he calls “previewing:”

I’m going to prep the kid in advance. “Hey we’re going to be doing this. You know, I want you to be able to participate in it.” I let them know, so we’re all going to be writing for 10 mins and then we’re going to be reading our pieces out loud. “I know that reading out loud worries you, but you don’t have to do it today. How about, in the next three classes you let me know one piece that you feel comfortable reading and that will be the day I’m going to call on you.”

Lisa said that sometimes the strategy is simply to support the teacher in a difficult situation:

Coaching teachers on how to manage their reactions to a situation where they feel like the kid isn’t reading what’s going on and to think about how to just be really sort of explicit and that that’s the sort of kindest most generous, most polite way to work with a kid.
With the help of the support team, some teachers have developed some strategies that are unique to discussion-based instruction. For instance, Ken uses coins in his classroom to help students with ASD regulate their participation. For those that are unaware of their tendency to speak too frequently, Ken gives them a set number of coins and asks them to only speak for the number of times they have coins, each time giving up a coin when they participate. For those who struggle to participate enough, the coins are used in the opposite way. This can be an effective, yet under the radar classroom strategy to help students with ASD regulate themselves during what can be difficult social interactions and discussions.

“We’re reliant on the teachers… to give us that feedback and see if things are working.” When it comes to evaluating the strategies being used in the classroom or the outcomes of accommodations at Beverly School, there was no consensus among the interview participants. Whereas Kyle feels that teachers are the best ones to evaluate what is working in terms of accommodations, “A lot of it we’re reliant on the teachers and also on the parents to give us that feedback and see if things are working.” In contrast, Ken felt this responsibility should lie elsewhere; “I would say at the end of the day the division head is the person who is determining, is this kid being served in the way that he or she needs?” However, Ken also asserted that with the strong team approach that Beverly uses, “Kids just are not going to fall through the cracks here.”

Summary

Interview data were used to gather findings in response to the research questions. In the schools studied, learning specialists create a student profile, which is a simplified version of the comprehensive learning plan, usually prepared by an educational psychologist. Student profiles
are provided to teachers so they can easily identify what recommended accommodations and strategies should be used in the classroom. The fact that there is alignment of practice in this area is important, because it shows that independent schools see the need to codify or standardize their practice. This practice will help to create stronger support programs if all constituents understand the process and allows families to know what the school can and cannot do to support their student.

At all three schools, the newer model of support is one described by interview participants as a “case management” model, meaning rather than learning specialists pushing in or pulling out to provide direct services, teachers are responsible for managing accommodations from day to day based on the learning plans that learning specialists provide. The interview data shows that administrators and learning specialists felt teachers are ultimately responsible for implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of learning plans and are expected to carry most of the responsibility of supporting students with ASD in this model. However, since independent schools in this study have not formalized the support structure in their schools and do not require teachers to receive specific training in supporting students with ASD, the level of support a student might receive will vary widely from teacher to teacher.

Although this study did not evaluate the actual practice of independent schools in supporting students with ASD, it did ask all respondents about their perceptions of strategies suggested in learning plans and whether they felt these recommended strategies are rooted in current research. Participants overwhelmingly described a “blanket approach” to accommodation in which the same standard recommendations are made, regardless of the student’s diagnosis. These common recommendations included extended time on assessments and assignments,
reduced work, preferential seating, prepared notes, etc. At Charleston and Beverly schools, advisors and learning specialists attempted to include some social and communication support strategies for students with ASD. However, overall, when asked if they knew whether the set of recommendations in the learning plans was supported by current research, none of the participants were sure which of their practices, if any, were rooted in evidence.
Chapter Five: Discussion

In this study, my goal was to investigate how independent schools are supporting students with ASD. Students with ASD reflect a growing population within the independent school system. Enrollment pressure and an overall increase in the identification of students with learning differences have put independent schools in the position of creating support and accommodations for their students. No longer in the position of being able to counsel students out of their programs or asking parents to invest in costly third party tutoring or specialist services, independent schools have embarked on the journey of creating support structures within their schools. Based on my research questions, over the course of 12 interviews, three site visits, and a review of the NAIS website and their publications, the following key findings emerged.

Key Findings

Independent Schools are Using a Similar Approach to Create Learning Plans

The data show that independent schools in the region of Southern California follow a common process of creating learning plans for students on the spectrum. Although learning plans can vary in style and format, all of the plans reviewed for this study followed the basic structure of identifying a student’s academic and social/emotional strengths and weaknesses, followed by a list of accommodations and suggested strategies for teachers to use in the classroom. Where there was some variability in learning plans was the degree to which accommodations were specific to the student or disability, or whether it was more of a plan with a “blanket” set of suggestions. The similarity of the plans and their resemblance to a public school learning plan is important because it indicates that independent schools recognize the need to standardize their processes and procedures surrounding student support.
The history of independent schools and the interviews from this study indicate that prior to about 10 years ago, schools relied heavily on an ad hoc system of teacher assistance outside the classroom and firefighting specific student problems in an effort to support students who were not performing up to academic standards. A lack of documentation or formality can lead to a deficit of support, leaving students and families in a position of confusion and frustration as they try to understand what the school can and cannot do to support them.

A lack of formalized processes can also affect a student’s ability to get approved for accommodations on standardized testing. For example, the College Board (2019)—the organization that administers the PSAT, the SAT, and AP course exams—requires not only an ed-psych report, or IEP, but also a copy of the student’s learning profile from their school in order to grant accommodations for students with learning differences. As part of a determination of need for accommodation, the College Board reviews what support a student has received from their school and compares that with performance in school and on previous tests. The way in which a school supports a student with learning differences and the way in which they document that process can influence whether accommodations will be granted on standardized tests. It is a good sign that there appears to be some standardization of process among independent schools. This alignment is a recognition of a school’s responsibility to this student population, even in the absence of legislation or oversight.

**Teachers Are Unaware that They Are Considered Responsible for Implementing and Evaluating Learning Plans**

In a school setting, without access to trained special educators and without access to specific services for students with learning differences, it makes logical sense that the main
source of support for students who struggle would be the classroom teachers. All three schools who participated in this study have an advisory period, where there is at least one other adult who interacts with students at least several times a week, if not daily. Even so, all of the learning specialists and administrators interviewed made it clear that it is the teacher’s job to not only implement the learning plan, but also evaluate whether or not accommodations and support strategies are working. Unfortunately, it would seem that teachers are either unaware of this responsibility, or feel unprepared to take it on. The teachers interviewed for this study made it clear that they lacked formal training in either the implementation or evaluation of learning plans. In fact, all three teachers named someone else as being ultimately responsible for assessing the relative success of accommodation or support strategies. A formal structure that supports students on the spectrum or those with learning differences must have a clear organization that each member in the student support team understands and is prepared for. Otherwise, the school is simply paying lip service to student support.

Traditionally, independent schools give teachers wide latitude when it comes to the classroom. Compared to public schools, independent schools allow teachers to decide what curriculum they will follow, how to set up their own grade scheme and pacing for a course, what resources and textbooks to use, and how to present their lessons. There is also quite a bit of diversity in policy from classroom to classroom in independent schools. Generally, independent school teachers are allowed to create their own rules as well as late and make-up work policies. This lack of top-down policy implementation in independent schools is exactly why it is problematic to place teachers in the role of evaluating outcomes; they have too much discretion...
to decide how, or whether to implement learning plans, and they lack the formal training to know how to evaluate outcomes for students with learning differences.

**Teachers Lack the Training to Appropriately Support Students in the Classroom, and Are Not Required to Participate in Professional Development**

The handful of articles from *Independent School Magazine* that discuss neurodiversity and students with learning differences all discussed the importance of specific professional development, training, and coaching that must form the basis for any support program in independent schools. Independent schools are under no legal obligation in the State of California to hire teachers with any formal teacher training or credentials. In most cases, a teacher who is hired to teach at an independent school for their first teaching job can expect to get a week’s worth of training before the school year starts. According to those interviewed for this study, the time spent in training prior to the school year most likely includes logistics surrounding a school’s policies, the school calendar, and employee expectations like dress code and outside of class responsibilities. Some schools interviewed, including Beverly School and Charleston School, spend time in groups running down their list of students with special needs and discuss general classroom strategies for students with learning differences. There is no evidence that a significant amount of time is spent educating teachers about how to support students on the spectrum in the classroom. At York School, Bethenny says that it can be up to a month into the school year before she even has a list of students with accommodations or access to their student profile. Specifically, she said, if you start teaching after the school year has started, you may miss all of the professional development offered for that year. By contrast, public school teachers are required to learn through the credentialing process the basic classroom strategies that help all
students learn, such as differentiation, scaffolding, and English language acquisition techniques like pre-teaching and activating prior knowledge. A teacher who is confident and good at finding resources can learn these strategies if they are motivated to do so. However, in the independent school world, it is rare that they would be forced to. Bethenny, Ken, and Thomas all mentioned ongoing professional development that happens over the course of a school year, although they all admit that these sessions are rarely specifically about students with learning differences. Teachers in independent schools are often allowed to choose a professional development to attend, but often are not required to do so. Bethenny spoke a lot about how much she has tried on her own to learn what she needs to know in order to best support her students on the spectrum and those with learning differences. A majority of the subjects interviewed for this study admitted that ongoing professional development is difficult because so many staff and faculty members need such a diverse set of trainings. Professional development can be expensive, and it requires an investment of time, either on the part of current staff to plan and deliver it, or on the part of teachers to travel to and from locations to participate in it. Not all teachers recognize the need for professional development. In this study, Thomas from Charleston School felt like putting a “smart person” in the room is enough. In his opinion, teachers who cared and were smart would be able to figure out what kids need.

This conflict among the traditional model of professional development in independent schools, a documented need for professional development, and the costs associated with implementing a broad support program is at the root of what prevents many schools from supporting students appropriately. The same enrollment pressures that drive independent schools to accept or keep students that would not have been part of the community in the past create
budgetary pressure that makes it difficult for independent schools to train staff and faculty properly. Until schools can find the funding to train all faculty in how to implement learning plans properly and evaluate the outcomes of those plans, it is inappropriate for teachers to carry the burden of this responsibility.

**Independent Schools Rely on Process and Implementation, Rather than Outcomes, to Evaluate Their Support of Students with ASD**

All three schools in this study reported that they try to prescribe specific classroom strategies for specific students’ diagnoses, strengths, and weaknesses. However, over the course of the study, it became clear that many of the strategies and accommodations suggested were a blanket set of strategies seen over and over on every student’s profile, according to teachers.

None of the subjects interviewed were sure that the strategies and accommodations that were suggested were based on evidence or research. Moreover, although the learning specialists all agreed that focusing on a student’s strengths, rather than addressing specific weaknesses, was the best approach, none of them knew whether that model was supported by any of the literature. The learning specialists’ explanation of the strength-based approach makes sense on the surface; focus on what students do best, tailor classroom experiences to those strengths and the rest will follow. If the outcomes of this approach were being evaluated appropriately, this approach could be validated. However, we know from the participants in this study that the evaluation process is most likely weak, and therefore some other validation process of the strengths-based approach is needed. As the literature review revealed, there is a great deal of contention over whether the blanket approach to accommodations is effective. Testing accommodations that are most common include: giving students additional time, allowing for preferential seating and breaks
during testing, allowing testing over multiple days, or in “chunks” and having a reader to read instructions or prompts. Whether these accommodations are effective for students on the spectrum or with specific learning disabilities is hotly debated. Those responsible for designing student profiles and implementing them in the classroom should be familiar with the literature because they are making decisions about support for students.

If the purpose of accommodations and classroom support is to allow students to access education in the same way as neurotypical students, then one main goal of accommodation in independent high schools is to prepare students for further study in college. Although it is seemingly not as common in independent schools, the deficit approach to support is the approach used in public schools and supported by research. Triennial learning plans in public schools often highlight areas of weakness and create specific goals for students to meet in the short-, medium-, and long-term. This approach allows teachers to focus on specific ways to help students improve skills and abilities, a process that would seem to better prepare them for future study. However, this approach to support means a larger, more organized support program is required to ensure that all teachers are focusing their support on specific deficits and will also require personnel trained to evaluate and identify progress against stated goals.

As mentioned in the literature review, there are already fully available systems that independent schools could implement. MTSS, or Multi-Tiered System of Support, is a framework to organize prevention interventions to provide building-level resources to address each student’s academic and/or behavioral needs within tiers that vary in intensity. MTSS allows for the early identification of learning and behavioral challenges and timely intervention for students who are at risk for poor learning outcomes (Hagans & Powers, 2016). This system uses
data collected about the individual student to determine outcomes and drive the selection of interventions. California State University Long Beach has a fully encompassing free professional development training on their website available to teachers. MTSS encourages assessment of student strengths and weaknesses and designation of intervention based on data. Ongoing assessments help teachers know if interventions are working. MTSS has recently been scaled up to high school level interventions.

In contrast, independent schools seem to rely on process and implementation, rather than outcomes, as a measure of how well they are supporting students with learning differences. Are they allowing testing accommodations? Are the parents and students happy? Are the teachers using good teaching practice? These seem to be the guiding questions that are used to determine if the school is living up to its responsibility to students with learning differences.

**Independent Schools Are Making Admission or Retention Decisions without Regard to Their Ability to Provide Appropriate Support**

Schools where inclusivity is ingrained into the school culture seem to be making better progress in creating support structures for students on the spectrum. At Beverly, it is clear to all constituents—administrators, learning specialists, teachers, and parents—that students with learning differences are welcome. Moreover, although Beverly does not consider itself a “psycho supportive school,” it does consider itself a traditional independent school with a model of strong care support. Understanding its brand is a way for them to drive institutional change that creates their “whole learning community.” Their clear communication of who they are helps them to attract teachers and families that understand the role of each member of the support team from the moment they enter the community. In the enrollment game of independent schools, this might
be the single biggest edge that Beverly has in their goal to be academically inclusive. An independent school must be able to clearly articulate who they are and what they can and cannot do for students in order to enroll families that will be happy and stay for the long term. Many independent schools are taking an “if you build it they will come” approach. However, given the enormous enrollment pressure on independent schools in the last 10 years, it is less about whether they will come and more about whether they will stay.

A school that struggles to articulate clearly what they can do for students who lie outside the neurotypical norm is going to struggle to support those students consistently. When process, implementation, and follow-through are ill organized or ad hoc in nature, students and families become frustrated and disillusioned. This may have an impact on enrollment as serious as any other factor.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite this study’s relevance and significance as one of only a few studies on independent school staff’s ability to address the needs of students with ASD, there are a number of limitations. First, the study is a small qualitative study that cannot address issues of generalization. Additional quantitative data collected from a larger sample of independent schools nationwide would provide a better picture of whether or not the phenomenon studied here is generalizable to the larger population of NAIS member schools. If the findings of this study were validated across a wider population, NAIS could use this data to plan more effective guidelines, best practices, and frameworks for its member schools striving to improve student support. Currently there is no clearinghouse where independent schools can obtain information about the practices and experiences of other independent schools, the way a public or charter
school might do. More research could lead to a better collection of data that will benefit all independent school practice in the realm of student support.

Finally, research directed at evaluating program models that support students with ASD in independent schools should provide needed information on best practices for school administrators, teachers, and parents. More data, both quantitative and qualitative, will be useful in future endeavors.

**Conclusion**

When it comes to supporting students with learning differences and specifically students on the autism spectrum, independent schools have a lot of work to do. The gravity of this work, coupled with a national trend in the decline of enrollment, complicate the process of creating adequate support structures within independent schools. Understanding what independent schools do and how they support students is critical given that they serve more than 580,000 students across the country. Independent schools cannot think about students on the spectrum or students with learning differences as a growth opportunity for enrollment shortages without considering the financial implications of needing more learning specialists and more professional development for teachers and staff. It is possible for independent schools to invest inexpensively in appropriate professional development to support program creation and expansion. However, this work should be led by the professionals who have the education and training to ensure that support is chosen based on current best practice and research.
School Leader/Administrator/School Psychologist Interview Protocol

Good afternoon. I am a UCLA doctoral candidate and I have been collecting data that will study how students with Autism Spectrum Disorder are identified and supported in independent schools. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is confidential. In order for me to accurately recall our conversation, I would like to digitally record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. Is this okay with you? If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder turned off, please feel free to let me know, and I will stop the recording. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. In your role as a school leader, how are you involved in the support of students with autism?
2. How would you describe your school’s philosophy toward students with learning differences, and with autism in particular?
3. How and when did inclusive education begin in your school? How long has your school been providing support to students with learning differences?
4. Inclusive education may require a team effort. Who are all the different adults and service providers (e.g., classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, other specialists) and how would describe the role that each person plays at your school?
5. How would you describe your role in the process of supporting students with autism and how does that role differ from other adults on the team?
6. Who do you see leading the inclusion work at your school?
7. Tell me about support for students with learning differences in your school. How many of these students do you have? How many of these students have an autism diagnosis?
8. How many staff are there that participate in inclusive education planning, strategy, implementation, and delivery (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, psychologists)?
9. How does your school decide that a student needs educational support?
10. Can you describe the process that your school uses to identify the educational supports that a student with autism might need?
11. What are the most common supports and strategies that your school uses? How did you (all) decide to/come to use these supports and strategies?
12. To your knowledge, are these supports and strategies based on evidence or research?
13. Who determines or sets the criteria for determining what supports or strategies are used?
14. How are educational supports documented, tracked and evaluated?
15. Who is ultimately responsible for evaluating the success of a student who receives educational support in and/or out of the classroom?
16. Does your school offer professional development to staff that are involved in the school’s inclusive education efforts?
17. As you think about all you do to support inclusive education, what is your school’s ultimate goal?
18. What do you find to be the most challenging or the most frustrating about inclusive education?
19. Is there anything else that you think I should know to more fully understand the inclusion work at your school?

Teacher/Learning Specialist Interview Protocol

Good afternoon. I am a UCLA doctoral candidate and I have been collecting data that will study how students with learning differences are identified and supported in independent schools. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is confidential. In order for me to accurately recall our conversation, I would like to digitally record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. Is this okay with you? If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder turned off, please feel free to let me know, and I will stop the recording. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. In your role as a teacher/school psychologist, how are you involved in the support of students with autism?
2. How would you describe your school’s philosophy toward students with learning differences, and with autism in particular?
3. What types of learning differences do you see in your classes?
4. How and when did inclusive education begin in your school? How long has your school been providing support to students with autism?
5. What do you think the expectations for students with autism are in your school?
6. Inclusive education may require a team effort. Who are all the different adults and service providers (e.g., classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, other specialists) and how would describe the role that each person plays at your school?
7. How would you describe your role in the process of supporting students with autism and how does that role differ from other adults on the team?
8. Who do you see leading the inclusion work at your school?
9. Tell me about support for students with learning differences in your school. How many of these students do you have? How many of these students have an autism diagnosis?
10. How many staff are there that participate in inclusive education planning, strategy, implementation, and delivery (e.g., teachers, paraprofessionals, psychologists)?
11. Are there supports and strategies that you think are not effective and if so, why?
12. Who determines or sets the criteria for determining what supports or strategies are used?
13. How does your school decide that a student needs educational support?
14. Can you describe the process that your school uses to identify the educational supports that a student with autism might need?
15. How are educational supports documented, tracked and evaluated?
16. Who is ultimately responsible for evaluating the success of a student who receives educational support in and/or out of the classroom?
17. How do you communicate and plan with these team members? What do you meet about?
18. Think of a typical student that you support in inclusive education. What does his or her typical day look like?
19. What do you find to be the most challenging or the most frustrating about inclusive education?
20. Is there anything else that you think I should know to more fully understand the inclusion work at your school?

**Parent Interview Protocol**

Good afternoon. I am a UCLA doctoral candidate and I have been collecting data that will study how students with learning differences are identified and supported in independent schools. This interview will last approximately 45 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is confidential. In order for me to accurately recall our conversation, I would like to digitally record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone else. Is this okay with you? If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder turned off, please feel free to let me know, and I will stop the recording. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Tell me about your child’s school. How long have they been a student there?
2. How long has your child been receiving educational support at this school?
3. Has your child attended other schools before attending their current school?
4. How would describe your child’s learning struggles? Does your child have an IEP or Educational/Psychological profile?
5. How would you describe the school’s philosophy toward students with autism?
6. What do you think the expectations for students with autism are in the school?
7. Inclusive education requires a team effort. Who are all the different adults and service providers (e.g., classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, other specialists) and how would you describe the role that each person plays at the school?
8. How would you describe your role in the process of supporting your child and how does that role differ from other adults on the team?
9. Who do you see leading the inclusion work at the school?
10. What are the most common supports and strategies that are used to support your child at school?
11. Are there supports and strategies that you think are not effective and if so, why?
12. Who do you see as responsible for determining what supports or strategies will be used to support your child?
13. How did you discover that your child needed special supports in the classroom? Was that at the current school, or a previous school?
14. Can you describe the process that your child’s current school uses to identify the educational supports that a student with learning differences might need? Is this the process your child went through? If not, can you describe that process?
15. Do you know how your child’s educational supports are documented, tracked and evaluated?
16. Who is ultimately responsible for evaluating the success of your child’s educational support in and/or out of the classroom?
17. Do you communicate and plan with these team members? What do you meet about?
18. What does your child’s typical day at school look like?
19. What do you find to be the most challenging or the most frustrating about the inclusive education process for you and your child?
20. Is there anything else that you think I should know to more fully understand the inclusion work at your child’s school?
### APPENDIX B: LEARNING PLAN AND TRACKING DOCUMENT SAMPLE

#### 8/16/16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAL EDUCATIONAL PLAN</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>STUDENT</strong></td>
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#### TALENT AREAS OF INTEREST

- Hockey
- Dog – Stanley pup
- Az. and Colorado
- Math – In 2nd grade solved a complicated word problem that the teachers had thought was unsolvable.
- Drawing
- Painting
- Pottery
- Building
- Creative story telling
- Critical thinking
- Integrates information from multiple sources beyond task expectations
- Sense of humor

#### TALENT DEVELOPMENT POSSIBILITIES

- Hockey team
- Chess club
- Swimming
- Rock climbing
- Pottery Wheel classes
- Cooking Classes
- Boy Scouts

### ABILITY PROFILE (Herman, 2015)

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<tr>
<th>Verbal Comprehension Ability</th>
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<th>Working Memory Ability</th>
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<td>Similarities</td>
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<td>Digit Span: Combined</td>
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<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Digit Span: Forward</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Digit Span: Backward</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
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<td>Letter Number Sequencing</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptual Reasoning Ability</th>
<th>141</th>
<th>Processing Speed Ability</th>
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<td>Block Design</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Coding</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture Concepts</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Symbol Search</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matrix Reasoning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Cancellation</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Picture Completion</td>
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</table>

#### SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL  Student Readiness

Possible Triggers: Has shown academic and social-emotional growth this year. While he is engaged in his learning, he is able to move freely in class. Academically, he

...
ability to inhibit off topic comments. Overall, he is showing less overwhelm and anxiety. He is showing greater maturity and seems to feel understood by his teachers. He responds to guidance to talk through academic and social problem solving and he is allowed time to process 1:1, as needed.

Regarding motor movements, there continues to be a delay when switching sets. Rather than say, “Stop running”, say “Please walk” as the transition is faster. At the start of new tasks, there is motoric overflow until he can self-regulate. While it’s body is moving, he is processing the information - it is not an indication of inattention.

He is embarrassed about OCD thinking and behaviors. He is aware of out-of-the-box thoughts, and he has repetitive movements that he continues until he feels he’s done it right such as picking up something over and over again. Watch to see if this shows up since it ebbs and flows and increases with attention to it. So check in to see if he has a ‘worry’, while avoiding the use of the label, ‘OCD’. “Don’t” and “Stop” aren’t effective and serve to increase the unwanted movements – only use those words for an immediate and dangerous situation.

... is triggered when he talks with peers or adults and he perceives that they don’t understand his comment.

Balance support with growing independence.

| Words to Say: Allow time to articulate his ideas 1:1 in the moment, or use a white board to show, so that there is a visual cue to guide him to choose among available options. |
| Actions to Take: Check in with to see how we can be helpful if he has concerns. |
| Long Term Behavioral Goal(s): to engage in areas of high interest, creativity and motivation |

DEVELOPING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS

- X Perceive
- X Initiate
- X Modulate
- X Gauge
- Focus/Select
- X Sustain
- X Stop/Interrupt
- X Flex/Shift
- X Inhibit
- Hold
- Manipulate
- Organize
- Foresee
- Generate
- Associate
- Balance
- Store
- Retrieve
- Pace
- Time
- Execute
- Monitor
- Correct
- Intrapersonal/Interpersonal/Environment/Symbol System (McCloskey)

DUAL DIFFERENTIATION INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

| CRITICAL VARIABLES | CRITICAL RESPONSES |

105
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<th>First</th>
<th>Last</th>
<th>Learning Profile</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Interferences / Challenges</th>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Current Notes (Mostly from Transition mtg May 2016) / Effective Strategies</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>ADHS, ABD (Asperger's)</td>
<td>Roller coaster design/engineering</td>
<td>Previously homeschooled Social: close with Juliana and Nathan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hard worker, respectful, very interested, slow and deliberate learning style</td>
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<td>WPPB</td>
<td>Purman</td>
<td>July, 2014</td>
<td>Verbal Comprehension, Processing Speed</td>
<td>Running, skiing, biological zoology</td>
<td>High verbal comprehension and reasoning, high self advocacy, highly anxious (casually associated with parents but also with unexpected events) Impulsive, holds herself to high standard (perfectionist) Needs constant feedback Often enrolls assignments at last but will come around very thoroughly, needs group work, with others Anxiety around public speaking Hamlim an oscillation to do work for her Will need to focus on high expectations and continually remind her</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ADHS, &quot;Autistic like behaviors&quot;</td>
<td>Magic</td>
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<td>ADHS, Anxiety</td>
<td>Plays chess and piano Doesn't eat lunch (major issue because of medication, often loses focus) Likes with cutting (often hidden) Serves on academic teams, doesn't like people around, especially when they eating Often wanders, finds it hard to stay focused Quick learner Passive in math class, but science textbooks help her with her work Wants to be a doctor, fascinated by human anatomy Goes through cycles of completing and not completing work</td>
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<td>MAI ADHD</td>
<td>Theme parks (especially those atmospheres and design) Can be defiant, disrespectful, impulsive (generally seeking peer approval), can be negative, has held grudges, prone to meltdowns when disciplined, can make inappropriate comments (often violates in nature, comments on suicide and murder), has had issues with poor behavior towards his peers</td>
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<td>Oxytocin, ADHD</td>
<td>Art, cooking, running, costume design and fashion Many triggers (but will apologize and modifyate after being called out), can have trouble with others (gets frustrated) Sensitive, kindhearted Needs a lot of 1-1 support in Math Needs to be reminded about time management and her outstanding work</td>
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<td>ADHD, Combined, Anxiety</td>
<td>Art, media tech, rugby Hyperactive of his own work Likes to be challenged in his work Highly praised by 8th grade teachers Slow, careful, careful in processing Has trouble admitting when he doesn't understand things, can shut down Comes in late, meets mornings Very social</td>
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<td>Processing Speed</td>
<td>Very bright (though often confused in this), highly peaked, &amp; looks to others for help Needs time and drafting, has trouble organizing his thoughts Slow processing speed, needs positive reinforcement Very interested in science Very introverted socially and is trying to grow his friend group</td>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Last</td>
<td>Learning Profile</td>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Interferences / Challenges</td>
<td>Interests</td>
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<td>Levy 2012</td>
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<td>Verbal Comprehension, Working Memory</td>
<td>ADHD - Inattentive, NVLD</td>
<td>Reading, chickens, media tech and coding, music (vowe, U2), Karate, cooking</td>
<td>Can be rigid at times (gets very frustrated), tends to catastrophize</td>
<td>Slow processing speed, especially when overwhelmed. Anxious around change, gets hung up on little things (peanuts). Has trouble getting out of his own head.</td>
<td>Troubles with self control (told of reporting back to parents)</td>
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<td>Elsborg 2017</td>
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<td>Visual Spatial Ability, Fluid Reasoning, Verbal Comprehension</td>
<td>Generalized Anxiety</td>
<td>Highly praised by 5th grade team, slow processing speed and low self esteem, (never asked when prompted)</td>
<td>Highly creative</td>
<td>He is an out of this world student, though can get annoyed by the lack of self control from his peers.</td>
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<td>スキルセンターリバール</td>
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<td>Verbal Comprehension, Visual Spatial Ability, Working Memory</td>
<td>Impulsive control, processing speed</td>
<td>Very unique, oftenhumming or talking to himself, can be in his own world. Loves Pokemon</td>
<td>Family moved here from Austria to go to Bridges. Owly engaged with technology (computer, phone, gameplay). Very gifted in science. Need to separate him from most of his peers (other students take charge with the humungous (swear word)). He will get frustrated out of control and inappropriate (sexual) themes (looking for ads on web). Very capable with his hands. Loves techno music. GOAL: decrease reliance on computer, support development of interpersonal relationships with other students</td>
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APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Colleague,

My name is Andee Steinman and I am the Head of Upper School at Palm Valley School, an NAIS member Independent School in the Palm Springs area. I am also an EdD doctoral candidate in UCLA’s Educational Leadership Program. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study of how independent schools identify and support high school students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

In addition to being a teacher, and an administrator in an independent school, I am also a mother of an autistic son who is the graduate of an independent school. Inclusive education is a passion of mine, and I want to learn more about how independent schools are serving students like my son.

I am hoping to interview three people at each independent school site. A teacher, an administrator or school psychologist, and a parent of a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I hope you will consider allowing your school to participate in this important study. Every individual interviewed for this study will earn a $50 Amazon gift card.

Please let me know if your school is willing to participate by replying to this email.

Thank you,

Andee Steinman
REFERENCES


California Education Code, §56043 (1980).


Riverside County Special Education Local Plan Area. (2017), *Private school procedures and supporting documents for addressing the needs of students with disabilities enrolled by their parents in private schools*. Retrieved from https://www.rcselpa.org/resources/resources/PrivateSchoolProcedures-Guidelines%20R%202-17x.pdf


