

8-2020

## The Student Placement Decision-Making Process: A Study Of Administrator Considerations

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THE STUDENT PLACEMENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESS:  
A STUDY OF ADMINISTRATOR CONSIDERATIONS

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Maine

August, 2020

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ABSTRACT

A myriad of factors are considered in the out-of-district placement process of special needs students, but there is not a standardized process for weighing these. Little is known about how Maine School Administrators weigh each factor to determine the appropriate placement. This interpretive phenomenological study examined the question: What is the hierarchy of priority of the factors used to determine out-of-district placements by Maine special education administrators?

Six special education administrators representing different geographic areas of the state of Maine were interviewed individually. The researcher utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit from within the targeted population those who have experience with the phenomenon of out-of-district placements. This qualitative phenomenological study identified trends and correlations based on transcript analysis of these six interviews. Data collected included information about length in position, demographics of district, number of out-of-district placements, experiences with the placement process, and an analysis of each director's priorities during the decision-making process.

Thematic findings included factors such as: safety, progress, medical needs, disability category, and finances. Safety was the primary or most important factor identified in the process hierarchy. The notion that students are making progress in their individual program was also a

primary consideration. Complex medical needs were also a factor for most district leaders when placing students out-of-district. Administrators did not report finances as a factor in this process, but all identified availability (both openings and potential fit) as a factor.

Safety was the resounding issue leading to out-of-district placements. This finding suggests that, if educators can better identify how to provide programs that ensure safety for students, more students could remain in-district. Understanding what these out-of-district placements provide that might be replicated in a public-school setting or public day program might help increase internal capacities of a district. District leaders should look at programs within their regions and find ways to share programs and resources to program for students in the least restrictive environment. In some cases, bringing in external training and expertise to build sustainable long-term programs would be in the interests of both students, staff, and communities. Keywords include: special education, factors, out-of-district placement, least restrictive environment, and special education administrators.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Federal education regulations require all students be entitled to a free, appropriate, and public education (FAPE). Despite school systems' best attempts to successfully educate all students, there remains a population that cannot be adequately supported by programs in a public-school environment. These students, most often requiring technical special education services, are placed into out-of-district settings. In Maine, these schools are called Special Purpose Private Schools (SPPS). The process for determining these placements relies on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team to consider and weigh a number of variables, including legal requirements such as those ensuring students are educated in their least restrictive environment (LRE).

The State of Maine licenses approximately 30 of these Special Purpose Private Schools (SPPS) scattered geographically around the state. The majority of these schools operate as day treatment programs, offering students simultaneous and coordinated clinical and educational programs. Most organizations operating a SPPS are also licensed behavioral health treatment organizations. The public-school systems rely on the SPPS to provide services for students for whom they cannot provide programs. While necessary, these programs are expensive and often greatly drive up local school budget expenditures. With a state special education identification rate of 16% already driving in-state costs higher than the 14% national average, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), identifying what these programs are doing effectively is paramount in informing efforts of K-12 leaders to expand the capacity of public schools to appropriately program for more of these students.

Several of the day treatment programs operate as non-profit residential-educational behavioral health programs. Staff in these programs are trained in de-escalation and behavior management techniques and follow comprehensive integrated plans. Educational requirements for staff are contingent on position, ranging from high school diploma to doctoral degrees, much like their public-school counterparts. The Special Purpose Private School's treatment programs provide an individualized education program, as outlined in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). These IEP's are aligned with state and federal special education standards and are tailored to meet each student's needs. Specialized instruction, often outlined in an IEP, includes the integration of innovative technologies, including the use of technology, programs, and devices, such as Edmentum, Promethean Boards, and iPads. Students' programs include ongoing assessment and frequent 1:1 attention adapted for a variety of behavioral, learning, and developmental needs. Teachers are often trained in subject specific, targeted interventions such as Direct Instruction, SPIRE, WILSON, or any number of other highly structured programs. There is a baseline expectation that classrooms in these programs are providing programming that is appropriately academically rigorous, individualized, and coordinated with treatment interventions and goals.

Students also receive individualized and comprehensive mental health treatment. This can include Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI), staff trained in de-escalation, behavior management, the CARE (Children and Residential Experience) model established by Cornell University, and a number of other appropriate treatment models. Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) might play a role in treatment. All services and staff follow an integrated plan. Daily schedules are consistent and predictable. Treatment includes a primary therapist, psychologist,

and other related service providers. Psychiatric medication management is also available.

Treatment planning includes parents, public school personnel, and the student.

Students enjoy low student-to-staff ratios, specialized curriculum, ongoing educational assessment, and programming catered to individual learning strengths and styles both educational and behavioral. The students attending these programs cannot be served in the regular public-school setting for any number of reasons, but most often, safety. The ability of staff at these out-of-district placements to successfully program for these students offers school districts an external option on a continuum of student placement restrictiveness, from services in the regular education classroom to in-patient residential treatment facilities. As Section 612(5)(a) of IDEA states, students should only be removed from the “regular educational environment” when “a student’s needs cannot be met in that setting, even with the use of supplementary aids and services” (Kurth, 2019, p. 3). These populations of students can be a challenge to program for and offer unique opportunities for educators to learn, grow, and master their craft.

Administrators play a unique and crucial role in the decision-making process around whether a student is placed in one of these programs, if the district can provide appropriate programming in the current public-school programs, or if a program should be created to create capacity within the district. Any number of factors can be considered in this process.

The availability of programs varies for any number of reasons. Governmental agencies involved in funding, referrals, and financing can all experience change depending on political climates. Public opinion and experience with services are also interconnected. The number of competitors has grown significantly over the past decade, and the number of school districts growing internal capacity, in efforts to avoid costly out-of-district placements, is also increasing. These further drives costs and competition for specialty personnel and in recent years, front-line

staff as detailed in John Stein's Washington Post Article, *This will be catastrophic': Maine families face elder boom, worker shortage in preview of nation's future* (2019). This shortage will include special education teachers and educational technicians. Needs of the community and consumers can also drive program funding or even de-funding. The incorporation of grants often makes the work financially viable, resulting in some level of dependence on grants being fully funded for many services. This also presents a challenge to successfully operating these types of programs.

Constant political, organizational, and environmental change put a baseline level of stress on staff that often contributes to burnout. As Kotter described throughout his book, *A Sense of Urgency* (2008), the baseline sense of urgency can make staffing uniquely challenging. Potential issues with wages, politics, pressure, and the consumer volatility are, for many, outweighed by mission-driven work with a population often underserved. The risks associated with funding and the relative stress organizationally are part of being a nonprofit. According to Brene Brown, "there are plenty of horror stories about poorly run community organizations" as she goes on to identify how challenges can have an unintended galvanizing effect (TED, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

As described to the Maine Department of Education by the Maine Education Research Policy Institute in a 2016 report on special education costs, from 2011-12 to 2015-16 school years, the percentage of students identified as requiring special education services in Maine grew from 15.6% to 16.7%. With this growing percentage, comes growing costs. This same report states that students in out-of-district placements are considered "high cost out-of-district placements" for funding purposes and cost at least four times the average amount of educating an in-district special education student. "Many of the students who are placed in out-of-district

settings are seldom educated within their communities. They often travel a significant distance from their local communities.” In addition to social concerns, “educating students in out-of-district schools results in exorbitant transportation and tuition costs for the home districts” (Ruby, 2008, p. 2). These students often become detached from their communities and lose any connections they might have made. Given the myriad factors to consider when making the decision for out-of-district placements and the lack of a standardized process, the decision process is complex. Little is known, however, about how Maine School administrators weigh each of the factors to determine the appropriate placement. “Absent additional innovation in practice or policy, dramatic shifts in placements such as those seen prior to 2007 seem far less likely to occur” (Williamson, 2020, p. 243).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the hierarchy of factors considered by Maine School Administrators in the placement of students out-of-district. Little research exists exploring the potential variables weighed in the decision-making process and the potential varying priority of each. Understanding the decision-making process utilized by individual special education administrators from various school districts in the State of Maine could further inform and improve the decision-making process for these Directors moving forward and help parents and IEP Team members understand the multiple layers of factors included in the decision-making process.

### **Research Question**

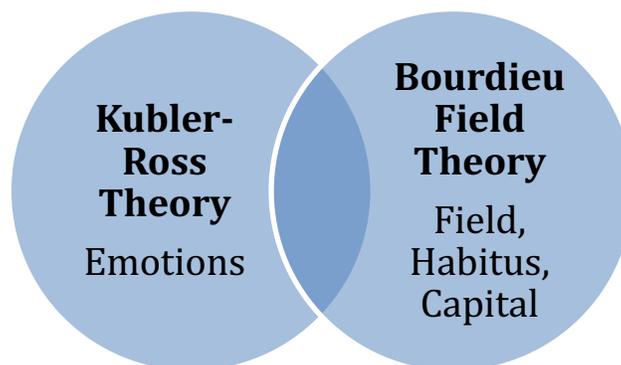
Because there is no standard in place for making the decision for out-of-district placement, this interpretive phenomenological study will examine the question: What is the

hierarchy of priority of the factors used to determine out-of-district placements by Maine special education administrators?

### Conceptual Framework

Multiple theories might provide a framework for the study of factors for the determination of out-of-district placements. As qualitative research, this study did not start with a single specific theoretical framework, but it is best described as “tending towards social constructionism, that is, the belief that our versions of the world are socially, culturally, and historically constructed” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p.172). The Kubler-Ross Theory and the Bourdieu’s Field Theory contain elements helpful in informing and understanding this study (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Intersection of Kubler-Ross and Bourdieu



While neither theory seems to meet all of the needs for a framework of study for this topic, a synthesis of the two seems to capture the innumerable variables and the nature of such decisions, some of which are emotional in nature. The qualitative nature of emotion requires a framework

flexible enough to account for distinction between theories and their application. Both can bring a reasonable meaning to interpreting outcomes.

“The notions of a social field, capital, and habitus” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 175) are taken from Bourdieu as these complex relationships between the educational leader and each potential variable play vital roles in the decision-making process. Bourdieu’s description of a *social field, capital, and habitus*, can each be directly related to an educational environment making the use of the social field model a viable option in the study of the process of decision making in- and out-of-district placements. A measure for these individual social tensions and an ability to potentially predict where and why tension might exist are attractive potential outcomes when applying Bourdieu’s Theory.

The change of a student’s placement often incites emotion. A sense of loss for parents or even an educational administrator is not unquestionable. The Kubler-Ross grief cycle is potentially helpful, “for understanding change in organizations” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p.187). The ability “to describe the emotional response of individuals affected by the imposed change, to analyze the responses through the lens of the grief cycle, to report other findings that may evolve” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 187), requires a method to understand barriers of eliciting personal emotional information from respondents. The use of the Feelings List built on one of the few existing Kubler-Ross studies might offer some level of insight into a specific response or reaction on the part of any stakeholders involved in the decision-making process.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

This study is susceptible to the limitations inherent in all qualitative studies. Data collection and data analysis take a great deal of time, the data is subjective, and the researcher can influence findings. Because data are only gathered from a few participants, the results may

not be generalizable to larger populations (Anderson, 2010). This particular study is limited to just six participants in an effort to garner deeper insight via personal interviews rather than the results a larger survey model might yield. As Jonathan Smith described in his 2017 article, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Getting at lived experience*, IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential research that recognizes the central role of the researcher/analyst in understanding the experiences of participants. This research design includes the potential limitations described, but also involves the researcher attempting to interpret how participants make sense of their experience. Participants' ability to thoughtfully articulate and make sense or communicate their experience is as much a potential limitation of this design as the analyst's ability to then extract any insight and describe findings in an objective manner.

Using a semi-structured interview process could also prove to be a potential limitation. While interviews provide rich detail, it is paramount for the researcher to remain neutral, so that the data retains credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Another potential challenge could be presenting, analyzing, and discussing the data openly without introducing personal biases. The researcher should "make every attempt by thinking about his or her own experience with the phenomenon and bracketing out his perceptions before collecting data" (Creswell, 2015, p. 228), and therefore bracketing was utilized in this study to mitigate bias.

Utilizing a non-probability, convenience sampling method also presents some inherent potential limitations "because those who volunteer to take part may be different from those who choose not to (volunteer bias), and the sample may not be representative of other characteristics, such as age or sex" (Marion, 2014, p. 126). The group from which the sample was taken is representative of the entire State geographically. The sample might not represent the entire State's geography, especially far northern sections of the state where there is less representation,

though proportionate to population. The location of private placements for students plays a role in the decision-making process for a district. Geographically, more rural districts might have very few choices for out-of-district placements that would influence the decision-making process, while urban areas might have several options.

The use of methodologies and protocols utilized in this study, including the interview questions, may have transferability to other states or groups of participants. The use of Special Purpose Private Schools, lack of regional programs, and design of day treatment services for behavioral health services in schools reflects services provided in every state under federal regulations. Members from any number of groups participating in the out-of-district placement process could yield interesting results, especially with regard to prioritization of variables considered in the process. For purposes of this study, special education administrators were participants.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Absent a formal process for weighing the individual factors that might be considered by a special education administrator, the process for placing a student can vary greatly from one school district to another. This variation can contribute to a lack of equity of services for students within a geographic region and potentially lead to students not being served in their least restrictive environment. A clear gap in the literature exists and a list of factors for consideration, how they should be weighed, and what factors should not be considered, might help to ensure consistency in decision making from district-to-district and also further inform practice for administrators who might not have been cognizant of factors playing into their decisions.

Within a community, the issue of placing a student out-of-district is significant on many levels, including financial costs, impacts on community, social implications, and realizing

federal standards. These placements are, at times, unavoidable, however a more thoughtful process might provide for an opportunity to grow a range of options, conserve resources, and enhance programs for all students. Systemic initiatives for educators to understand the implications of trauma, how to appropriately interrupt a crisis cycle, or how to successfully intervene with a specific behavior, would impact entire communities. Trends in considerations of administrators' decisions examined in this study help to identify programs to improve internal capacity for districts and regions.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Children and Residential Experiences (CARE)* is a book and treatment model created by Cornell University.

Day treatment includes behavioral health services provided as part of an educational program as defined in Maine Unified Special Education Regulations (MUSER)

Edmentum is an online curriculum material platform.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is plan described in federal special education regulations.

Individualized education program is a program associated with an IEP.

Promethean Boards are a specific type of Smart Board

Special Purpose Private Schools (SPPS) are schools allowed by Maine State statute that provide some specialized component, often behavioral health services.

Targeted Intervention is a subject matter intervention aimed at student two or more grade levels behind peers.

Therapeutic Crisis Intervention is a crisis management system, including physical management techniques.

## **Conclusion**

Special education student placement has implications for school district budgets, communities, relationships, and the allocation of any number of resources. The decision to place a student out-of-district is important for a myriad of reasons and therefore, a consistent approach to weighing the various potential considerations, and even what those considerations are, is of great significance to individual students. Understanding how these factors are considered, with what weight and degree, and to what end potentially extraneous factors play in the process, can inform the process moving forward and ensure less variability from district-to-district.

The importance of improving school programs, reducing costs where possible, and providing students with necessary services underscores the importance of learning from what works. “Evidence from carefully conducted research studies can help in the improvement of educational outcomes” (William, 2019, p. 127). Understanding where further leadership development is needed in schools, and using Maine special education administrators as a resource for learning about how they might successfully program in-district for an increasing population of special education students and reduce the number of out-of-district placements, is important in responding to these growing needs.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In a time when schools are asked to stretch resources further and further, violence is an increasingly pervasive concern, and school leaders must be adept at balancing student needs with resources and risk, there are a number of factors they must consider and weigh when making decisions related to the placement of students into Special Purpose Schools (SPPS). “These factors include, but are not limited to, legal requirements to place the student in the least restrictive environment, available resources in the school district, parental preferences, teacher preferences, and limited budgets” (Deninger, 2009, p.1). The costs of these placements far exceed the large price-tag, having implications for students, families, schools, relationships and ultimately, communities.

There are often both pros and cons that come with any student placement. Depending on an individual’s perspective, these lists can look much different. This lack of an understanding of perspectives and other factors can often lead to costly legal battles, hard feelings between families and schools, or even damage relationships within districts. This thematic review attempts to synthesize relevant literature from studies of individual factors with interviews of practicing administrators in an effort to understand the decision-making process.

### Topical Research

Educational leaders must account for a number of factors when making decisions around the placement of students, especially those placements made out-of-district to often small, private and costly programs. These factors range from the highly technical nuance of special education regulations and interpretation to the qualitative nature of relationships and feelings. The interplay of these factors, including how these might be prioritized differently dependent on circumstance has not been a topic of literature.

## **Context**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) charges public schools in the United States with providing an education to all students, regardless of a student's language, needs, or available resources within the district. Mental illness, extreme behaviors including violence, or intense physical needs might all be a catalyst for the discussion of an out-of-district placement.

## **Out of District Placements**

The factors facing a school administrator when considering placing a student out of district are numerous and vary in nature from the legal obligations detailed in special education regulations to the availability of appropriate placements. A study conducted by McKinney (2011) found:

When combining the scores of often and always results indicated the following top three factors influencing student placement in a publicly funded, private program:

- (a) availability of appropriate services in the public schools (84.9%);
- (b) limitations on Local Educational Agent (LEA) staff in serving children (50.2%); and
- (c) parent preference (28.4%).

A review of the current literature finds that each of these factors are considered individually, but not collectively or the interplay amongst them examined to any great depth. This gap in current literature underscores the significance of this review, furthering understanding of the considerations and demands of the educational leader in the decision-making process in these situations. This review attempts to synthesize the best of current

information surrounding these factors. The first step for most administrators in the decision-making process is compliance with federal, state, and local regulations.

### **Regulatory Compliance**

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) and subsequent reauthorizations, require educators to ensure students receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) *Free*, compels schools to pay for all costs associated with an out-of-district placement no matter the cost. The term *Appropriate*,

...requires that students with disabilities be educated with peers without disabilities ‘to the maximum extent appropriate’. When the individualized education program (IEP) team is reviewing the student's current performance, establishing the student's goals, and determining the services that the student will require, they must also identify the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which these services can be provided. (Rozalski, 2010, p. 153)

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is determined by the IEP Team. These decisions are based on available resources and consequently vary by municipality. Some have cited that, “uncertainty in determining an appropriate LRE has become a significant obstacle to educating students with disabilities” (Alquraini, 2013, p. 152). As Yell and Katsiyannis (2004) described in their article, *Placing Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Settings: Legal Guidelines and Preferred Practices*, the LRE clause of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) created a spectrum of opinions on the depth and breadth of the meaning and interpretation of the term “maximum extent appropriate” (p. 30). Opinions and interpretations continue to vary from state to state and even from district to district within a single state. Considerations in restrictiveness do not only include physical locations, but also the amount of

support staff, proximity of staff, or any other constraint or support put within an environment. Some have used this argument for full inclusion of all students, meaning, the placement of students with Individualized Educational Plans into the general curriculum. This can range from part of a class to a full school day and has been referred to as *mainstreaming* in the past.

### **Inclusion**

Proponents of full inclusion for all students often use LRE as an argument for all students to be provided programming within the general education framework, including physical environment. Data identified by Mullings' (2011) research "identified full inclusion as the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities, proved instrumental in providing opportunities for teachers and administrators to become more responsive to maintaining equal treatment regarding opportunities, education, and social benefits for all students" (p. 3). Despite proponents of full inclusion, there are a number of circumstances where students are placed in private placements. Even staunch supporters of inclusion are still uncertain whether or not LRE is considered appropriate for all students with disabilities.

IDEA requires school districts to educate students with disabilities in the LRE, while considering two requirements. Firstly, the student with disabilities must be educated with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Secondly, and as Alquraini (2013) wrote, the IDEA emphasizes students with disabilities should, "only be moved to separate classes or schools when the nature or severity of their disabilities is such that they cannot receive an appropriate level of education in a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services" (p. 158).

A continuum of restrictiveness of placements is often explored sequentially for students, in an effort to ensure LRE is realized for the individual. In 'Endrew F. v Douglas County School

District RE-1', the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the requirement that schools provide special education services designed to confer educational benefit that is, more than de minimis. The Endrew case offered, "an opportunity for the special education community to consider whether students with learning disabilities have access to a full continuum of services, including individualized, data-driven, and intensive interventions" (Lemons, 2018, p. 130).

Academic rigor and sound evidence-based practices have become a standard for most private placements in an attempt to ensure students continue to progress academically. Often, these placements have specialty services, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) programming, ABA based services, LD specialties, integrated mental health services or any number of other services. These services are often challenging to duplicate in a public-school setting, leading to questions of pros vs cons of the range of placements.

### **Pros and Cons of Outplacement**

The question of whether the benefits for the student attending a private placement are going to outweigh the downsides can arise in the case of a student receiving treatment for mental health needs or even attending a specialty school for the blind and visually impaired. Ackermann (2012) cited the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) 2010 Fact Sheet, noting "3.1 million young people received treatment for emotional or behavior problems in 2008, but that this number only represented 20% of the actual incidences of emotional and/or behavioral difficulties". This is just one special education category, but likely indicative of just how great the need for specialty services is. The lists of pros and cons are generally lengthy and might differ from parents' or other perspectives.

**Financial implications** can be an unwanted burden a leader tries not to consider, but ultimately is responsible for. The financial burden of-out-of-district placements on district

resources is well documented, but as if the pressures were not enough, “the current k-12 national annual average cost per student for a student not requiring special education is \$7,552 and the average annual cost per special education student is an additional \$9,369 per student, or \$16,921. The federal government is providing local school districts with just under 20 percent of its commitment rather than the 40 percent specified by the law, creating a \$10.6 billion shortfall for states and local school districts” (NEA, 2018, p. 1). This burden is on communities before they even look at the cost of out-of-district placements. Maine publishes the daily rate for Special Purpose Private Schools annually on their Department of Education website at: [www.maine.gov/doe/learning/specialed/fiscal/SPPS](http://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/specialed/fiscal/SPPS). These considerations might challenge an administrator to try to increase internal capacity by creating programs on-site or in district.

Program creation is an area of potential dissention amongst IEP team members, especially when parents or advocates have strong feelings one way or another. “When divergent views between families and educational staff cause deadlock in the IEP process, the IDEA makes available a continuum of resolution options ranging from collaborative approaches to more adversarial ones, such as due process hearings” (Feinberg, 2014, p. 1). Potential dissention is yet another factor for consideration by an educational leader. A leader might ask themselves if there are further implications politically or if the case is precedent-setting. Questions may arise about whether others are going to follow suit, what the decision says to the school, or whether there the number of students placed out of district is within the federal and state limits.

For a small school district or potentially in any district, placing a student in an out-of-district placement might mean fewer financial resources for other important things. This financial burden can be even greater if a student also requires a residential component. Ultimately, there are costs to the student, family, school, and community. A student might get

much needed treatment in a private placement, but might also feel isolated, alienated, unwanted, and like they have failed...as if they have been sentenced to a program outside of their school and district. There are risks a student can become detached from their community and lose any connections they might have had, but then studies, such as that conducted by Reed (2012), compared the impact of placement in mainstream and special schools on the behavioral and social outcomes of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Reed concluded that special schools demonstrated superior performance and highlighted a need to readdress special school placement as an alternative to mainstream placement for children with ASD. Experiences, just like the programs, will vary greatly.

Families can feel detached or unwanted by a school for even suggesting outside placements or might demand a private placement. A specific SPPS might be seen as an expert on a condition and preferred by a parent despite appropriate resources in-district, further complicating educational placement and at times, driving demands and legal intervention. There are also many examples of students who flourish in these placements, eventually moving back to their sending schools and/or graduating. There are also examples of students who are not placed into private schools, but whose behaviors present significant safety risks. School shootings have highlighted the importance of assessing the risk of having a student in a public school, especially for violent or unstable students.

The frequency and severity of school violence, including school shootings, has led to an increase in research about this topic. The Safe Schools Initiative Report suggested, “71% of the attackers were victims of bullying and 10% of the attackers who were receiving treatment for their diagnosed mental illness failed to comply to take their prescribed psychiatric medications and 87% of school shooting perpetrators left behind evidence that they were victims of severe

bullying” (Gerler, 2007, p. 2). Despite recent attention, including research, resulting from extreme cases of school violence, “there is minimal literature regarding the ways school counselors can be proactive in identifying students who may be prone to violence and the strategies that can be utilized to lessen the possibility of school shootings” (Alison, 2018, p. 3). That being said, this factor weighs heavily on any administrator when looking at potentially placing a student out-of-district. Violent physical behavior can be challenging to manage in a public-school environment. Often, referrals are made for this reason.

Day treatment environments or specialized schools serve an important role in the continuum of education for some of the most challenging students to educate, but they also help to drive the disproportionate costs associated with special education programs. “IDEA provides states with funding to educate 6.48 million students a year. IDEA was intended to educate 10% of disabled students, but now educates 14% of all disabled students nationwide. Remarkably, during the twenty-five-year period between 1980-2005, general education students grew by 20%, while special education students grew by 37%. Special education costs roughly \$110 billion per year and consumes 21% of all education spending across the nation” (Perna, 2015, p. 555).

While necessary, alternative schools or special purpose private school programs are expensive and often drive up local school budget expenditures greatly. With a State of Maine special education identification rate nearly 3% higher than the national average, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), identifying what these programs are doing is paramount in efforts to expand the capacity of public schools to appropriately program for more students which literature suggests is often most beneficial to students.

The costs associated with placing students in out-of-district special education placements is well documented as is the proportion of special education costs relative to the total operating

budgets of most school districts across the nation. “When students with learning disabilities cannot be served in a public-school program and the child's individual education program (IEP) team agrees upon a private school placement for the child, the district is responsible for paying for the program” (Logsdon, 2018, para. 5). These special education placements are different from their public-school program counterparts as discussed in many journal articles. Specialty services, medical services, latest therapies, techniques, and specific training, are all potential reasons why an outplacement might be beneficial for a student, but as the next section describes, there is also literature that supports the idea that having a student in their own community with natural supports available might be the best option. Leadership qualities of educational leaders in day out-of-district placements might contribute to more or less placements in a district, though there are certainly other factors such as socio-economic status, access to special education consultants and support groups, legal help, and knowledge of the formal special education process.

### **Potential Downsides of Out-of-District Placements**

Downsides of out-of-district placements vary according to the placement. Like any public school, these private placements also have their own strengths and limitations. An educational leader needs to determine what these pros and cons are for individual placements. Leadership, experience with past students, and observations are all helpful in determining what types of students might be successful or not.

Research has demonstrated that segregation of students who learn differently is ineffective because,

- a. Exposure to appropriate student models is absent or minimal,

- b. Students with severe disabilities tend to learn ‘handicapped’ skills, attitudes and values,
- c. Teachers tend to strive for the resolution of educational ‘problems’ at the expense of developing functional community-referenced skills,
- d. Most comparisons between students are made in relation to degrees of disability rather than a criteria performance, and
- e. Lack of exposure to students who learn differently limits the probability that the skills attitudes and values students without disabilities will become more constructive and appropriate. (Smith, 2006)

According to Herhir (2012), “evidence that separation from the mainstream is associated with poorer standardized test performance for students with disabilities,” (p. 2) is another potential risk.

The research clearly summarized by O’Laughlin (2013) concluded that, “scholars increasingly argue against the dichotomous concepts of inclusion/exclusion in schools, the existence of which effectively marginalizes children if they fall into either category” (Valle, Connor, Broderick, Bejoian, & Baglier, 2011, p. 2290). As far back as the 1980s, Gartner and Lipsky (1987) argued that there was no compelling evidence that segregated special education programs had any significant benefits for students. More recently, Zuna and Turnbull (2004) argued that the creation of laws such as P.L. 94-142 used to categorize children for funding purposes were probably a mistake from the start. They reasoned that, “a better policy would have been one that addressed the needs of all students” (O’Laughlin, 2013, p. 5).

### **Limitations of Schools**

Public school districts can provide a range of educational services, both regular and special education in nature. Limitations of these ranges are based on the size of schools, available resources, expertise, need, and ability of school leaders and personnel. All schools are not created equal with regard to any of those resources. How resources are utilized can be as important as the amount of resources available.

Leadership can be a limitation. “Unlike data that show that all states require credentials for special education teachers, national data indicate that only 27 states require licensure/certification/endorsement as an administrator of special education” (Boscardin, 2010, p. 61). Balancing all of the factors in these sorts of decisions relies heavily on the educational leader. What are the school’s values? Is the culture in a school welcoming and accepting? Many schools are beginning to adopt initiatives to further meet student needs, including student health centers, partnerships with community resources, more and more trauma informed trainings and approaches to meeting student needs. These limitations are a further consideration for an educational leader. The notion of building capacity only works if there are enough students requiring a service. Sometimes, placing a student out-of-district is the most cost-effective option.

### **Conclusion**

The factors that weigh on educational leaders in decisions surrounding student placement are challenging to list in totality as they are both so numerous and also span such a broad spectrum. Factors considered in the decision-making process range from highly technical regulatory compliance in special education to the qualitative nature of relationships. Any individual involved in the process of placing students, who want a better understanding of why

students are placed out of district, or who simply want to better understand the perspective of an educational leader and the dynamics they must confront will benefit from this review.

The list of factors explored in this review include, regulatory compliance, parental preference, school capacity, availability of other settings, relationships with parents, budgetary obligations, relationships with teachers, service providers, and unions. The list of factors can seem to be endless at times, but realizing and prioritizing them, can be an exercise at looking at a school's internal capacity and honestly approaching student placement. The lack of literature on the interplay of these factors, the limited resources not exclusive to one factor, and the need for leaders to have greater insight into their own decision-making process make this study compelling.

Students are placed out of district for a myriad of reasons, but any placement is the result of a process. Literature supports the concept that placements truly are the result of individualized programming and process. The number of factors individually identified and accounted for in the process demonstrate how complicated placement is and how sophisticated an educational leader must be to appropriately navigate a placement process. Understanding the factors that play into these decisions can often lead to a more cohesive approach to the process and potentially better relations when compromises must be made. Individual interviews with school administrators offer insight into the out-of-district decision-making process.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study is to examine the factors considered by Maine School Administrators in the placement of students into special purpose private schools including the hierarchy of priority utilized for each in the decision-making process. The rationale for this study is that administrators consider different factors and with varying degrees of importance in this placement process. In this study, the researcher interviewed, via Zoom, current Maine school special education administrators, who serve as representatives to the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC) Representative Board, about these considerations to deepen the understanding of what these factors are and to inform and improve process.

### **Central Research Question**

This study explores the central research question: What is the hierarchy of priority of the factors used to determine out-of-district placements by Maine special education administrators? The process of making meaning of these experiences is “inter-subjective; that is, their significance is shaped through the interaction and mutual influence of individual, subjective impressions of shared experience” (Ravitch, 2017, p. 142). The process of analyzing and understanding these perspectives and processes, potential thematic insight, research from the literature review, and the theoretical framework informed the development of the research question.

### **Methodology**

The methodology, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), provides an opportunity to understand, analyze, interpret, and synthesize the various qualitative experiences of a collection of school administrators related to placing students’ out-of-district. This

phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to look at the multiple variables that are accounted for in the special education administrator's decision-making process.

A relative strength of IPA as a research design for this study is the potential for providing interesting insights into the subjective processes involved for individual administrators making placement decisions. Kay and Kingston (2002) argued that their choice of a qualitative research method such as IPA, reflected their desire to explore in depth the reasons behind people's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors regarding their research topic. IPA can provide a framework for the "varied elements which make them up such as thoughts, perceptions, feelings and episodes of emotion experience...emotions are structured because they form an integral part of the evolving order of thoughts and feelings, actions and events" (Kay, 2002, p. 485).

As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) described, IPA requires the researcher to be a sensitive listener, "encouraging detailed stories, thoughts, and feelings from semi-structured, one-to-one interviews" (p. 56). The willingness of respondents to honestly share their personal experiences, both those they have seen as positive or negative, are important to this study and deserve respect from the researcher. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) also described the researcher as needing to be "open minded, flexible, patient, empathetic, and willing to enter into a respondent's world" (p. 55).

### **Setting**

During this unprecedented modern pandemic, interviews were conducted via Zoom Meetings. The six respondents seemed at ease having these conversations in the solitude of their homes. These participants represented districts of varied size from across the State. Two of the districts were closer to urban areas while one was rural.

## **Participants/Sample**

This study relies primarily on recorded interviews with special education administrators representing various public schools and regions in Maine. The six participants in this study were members of the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities organization (MADSEC) and as such, the organization's Executive Director was asked permission and to disseminate an email to members asking for volunteers to participate in the study. This email contained information describing the nature of the study, requirements of participants, and the release to be signed for consent to participate (See Appendix B). The researcher utilized a purposive sampling method to recruit from within the targeted population that has experience with the phenomenon of out-of-district placements. The first representative administrator from each of the first six to ten counties of the sixteen in Maine to send back the signed consent were selected as participants, ensuring some level of geographic diversity.

The researcher explained in the emailed request for participation that the integrity of the study relies on the honest and forthright description of their individual placement process. The researcher described the importance of sharing factors such as feelings, relationships, community considerations, and the prioritization of each in the process.

Volunteers were interviewed one-on-one for approximately 40-60 minutes to talk about out-of-district placements (See Interview Questions- Appendix A). Eligible participants in the study were current public special education administrators who have first-hand experience in placing students out-of-district in the State of Maine.

The majority of school districts in Maine are members of the MADSEC organization. Representatives from regions across Maine meet monthly to discuss legislative and regulatory matters concerning the provision of special education in various public and private schools.

These representatives tend to be more experienced educational leaders with a willingness to participate in conversations and dialogue in efforts to advance the field and benefit students.

The fundamental question, *what are the considerations made in the placement of students out-of-district?* drove the interview conversation. The goal of the researcher was to garner an insightful and complete response, inclusive of all of the variables an administrator might have to consider. Feelings, relationships, and ultimately, ethics, potentially play a role in placement and the researcher had to be empathetic in eliciting the most honest of answers. Probing questions played an integral role in the level of detail, especially when the participant provided little detail or one-word responses. Open-ended questions detailed in Appendix A (Interview Questions) and Appendix B (Informed Consent) served as the interview guide.

### **Data Collection**

In an effort to prepare a qualitative foundation for participants in answering the research questions, a protocol for individual recorded semi-structured interviews was developed. Participants received a written consent form, a copy of the 12 open-ended questions utilized in the interview, and a reminder of their individual interview, all via email, at least 24 hours prior to being interviewed. Participants were invited to submit their choice of days and times for the interview. The researcher began interviews with an informal conversation reviewing the purpose and parameters of the study. The researcher used this time to try to create rapport and establish a relaxed atmosphere. As pointed out by Moustakes (1994), this is an integral part of a phenomenological study. The open-ended format of the questions allowed respondents to describe their experiences and the researcher to prompt further response when something was unclear. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, though interview time slots allowed for up to an hour. Private emails were sent to each participant to arrange interview appointments.

Participants were made aware of the specific pseudonym assigned to them with the understanding that it would be utilized in the interview transcripts and resulting dissertation. The likelihood of individual directors knew one another outside of the context of this study is heightened given the total number of Directors around the State and memberships in associations such as MADSEC. The same initial questions were asked of each participant with unscripted follow-up questions asked by the researcher. The researcher explained both the method for recording the interview and the method utilized for transcription.

These transcripts and recordings were the basis for data collected for this interpretive qualitative phenomenological study. Video recordings of transcripts were compared against transcripts to ensure accuracy by the researcher. During a second viewing of these videos, notes were taken in the margins of transcripts. Transcripts were read a third time and more notes taken. These notes then became the basis for emergent themes. Transcripts of conversations about these placement experiences were then color coded according to emergent theme. A list of themes and sub-themes was developed upon completion of identifying emergent themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding of textual data was completed manually. As qualitative research, this study did not start with a single theoretical framework, but for data analysis utilized a structured phenomenological traditional method. Creswell (2013) advised researchers to “first describe [their own] personal experience with the phenomenon under study. The researcher [should] begin with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon” (p. 193). Bracketing this personal experience of the phenomena from those experiences shared by participants was part of the interview process.

Bourdieu's Field Theory likely contained elements helpful in informing and interpreting these data. The qualitative nature of emotion required a framework flexible enough to account for distinction with a reasonable meaning in outcomes. "The notions of a social field, capital, and habitus" (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 178) are taken from Bourdieu as these complex relationships between the educational leader and each stakeholder play vital roles in the decision-making process. Bourdieu's description of a social field, capital, and habitus can each be directly related to an educational environment making the use of the social field model a viable option in the study of the process of decision making in out of district placements. A measure for these individual social tensions and an ability to potentially predict where and why tension might exist are attractive potential outcomes of the application of Bourdieu's Theory.

### **Research Design Limitations**

This study is susceptible to the limitations inherent in all qualitative studies utilizing a semi-structured interview process. Data collection and data analysis takes a great deal of time, the data is subjective, and the researcher can influence findings. Because "data are only gathered from a few participants, the results may not be generalizable to larger populations" (Anderson, 2010, p. 141). This particular study is limited to just six participants in an effort to garner deeper insight via personal interviews rather than the results a larger survey model might yield.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative, experiential research that recognizes the central role of the researcher/analyst in understanding the experiences of participants. This research design includes the potential limitations described, but also involves the researcher attempting to interpret how participants make sense of their experience. Participants' ability to thoughtfully articulate and make sense or communicate their experience was as much a potential limitation of this design as the analyst's ability to then

extract any insight and describe findings in an objective manner. While interviews provided rich detail, it was paramount for the researcher to remain neutral, so that the data retained credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A researcher's journal aided in the triangulation of data points such as the connection of emotion and feelings. Another potential challenge was presenting, analyzing, and discussing the data openly without introducing personal biases. As a phenomenological study, it is imperative that the message conveyed through narratives accurately describes the sentiments of the participants.

Since the participants were selected utilizing a non-probability sampling method, this methodology also presents some inherent potential limitations, "because those who volunteer to take part may be different from those who choose not to (volunteer bias), and the sample may not be representative of other characteristics, such as age or sex" (Oswald, p.176). The group from which the sample was taken is representative of the entire State geographically. The sample does not represent the entire State's geography, especially far northern section of the state where there is less representation, though proportionate to population. The location of private placements for students played a role in the decision-making process for a district. Geographically, more rural districts have very few choices for out-of-district placements which influence the decision-making process, while urban areas might have several options.

### **Validity**

The validity of any conclusions drawn from this research required that the researcher take every step to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, by addressing creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Creditability/Confirmability/Dependability**

This study was limited by the ability of the researcher to refrain from judgment and therefore bracketing was utilized to manage any potential bias. A transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to look at a phenomenon in a new way as if perceiving situations for the very first time (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher sought to limit bias by thinking about their own experience with the phenomenon and bracketing out perceptions before collecting data (Creswell, 2007).

**Transferability**

The use of methodologies and protocols utilized in this study, including the interview questions, may have transferability to other states or groups of participants. The use of special Purpose Private Schools, lack of regional programs, and design of day treatment services for behavioral health services in schools reflects services provided in every state under federal regulations. Studies with participants from any number of groups participating in the out-of-district placement process could yield interesting results, especially with regard to prioritization of variables considered in the process.

**Participant Rights/Ethical Issues**

Participant rights were respected. During the introduction to the study, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and consent could be revoked at any time. Signed informed consent forms containing agreements (See Appendix B) further ensured communication pertaining to consent was clear. Any recognizable information gathered was de-identified. Interviewees, in no particular order, are referenced only by a letter A-F.

Unintended outcomes of participation in this study might have included the participant recounting placement decisions that might not have prioritized or recognized considerations as

outlined by statutes surrounding least restrictive environment. Participants could have re-thought their own process and become more measured in their approach to future decisions. Or participants might have recognized flaws in past decisions and take a revisionist approach.

The placement of students into out-of-district programs is governed by rigorous special education regulations, most notably requirements for students with disabilities to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Administrators are often tasked with balancing regulatory compliance, such as LRE, with costs, and any number of other factors. The feelings and other variables associated with the decision-making process can create questions of ethics and values for the decision makers (participants). There was potential for resistance to discuss variables of this nature.

### **Summary**

There is literature on placing students into their least restrictive environment, but little exists that detail the variables considered in the process, beyond those explicitly identified in regulation. While IEP teams are charged with determining the least restrictive environment, often the school administrator is the gatekeeper for the continuum of services that extend beyond more traditional services. The purpose of this study is to understand these factors considered by Maine School Administrators in the placement of students into out-of-district settings including the hierarchy of priorities utilized for each in the decision-making process.

This study is important in understanding the variables and relations considered in the process by the special education administrator in six districts in the State of Maine. A transcendental phenomenological research design was selected for the study, because it presented the prospect of understanding the process of consideration a Director undertakes when potentially out-placing a student. Understanding this process might garner insight into how to

better increase the internal capacity of a district to provide services, further the understanding for the multiple stakeholders at an IEP of the multiple considerations, and potentially lead to better outcomes for students requiring sized services.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This qualitative interpretive phenomenological study was conducted in an effort to document the hierarchy of factors considered by Maine School Administrators in the placement of students out-of-districts. Little research exists exploring the potential different variables weighed in the decision-making process and the potential varying priority of each. Understanding this decision-making process utilized by individual special education administrators, including similarities and differences, is important. This understanding can further inform and improve the decision-making process for administrators and districts moving forward, help parents and IEP Team members understand the multiple layers of factors included in the decision-making process, and better inform practices in this placement process.

Over the second and third weeks in July of 2020, interviews with six special education administrators representing various regions of the State of Maine were conducted to better understand factors in the determination of out-of-district placements. These interviews, via ZOOM, lasted 40-60 minutes. While more than six directors volunteered to participate in the study, the six participants interviewed were the first available from each of six regions represented by the pool of candidates. The number of six interviews is derived from the goal to represent more than half of the 11 MADSEC regions. To ensure confidentiality, the study employed several privacy tactics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) including the assignment of pseudonyms to participants, locked storage of transcripts, paperwork, and the recording device. All recorded transcripts will be deleted upon completion of the study and dissertation. Each participant was asked each of the questions identified on the questionnaire (see Appendix A) with appropriate relative probing and clarifying questions. The sample of participants is representative of the State and included six randomly selected geographic regions. Directors

from all regions and districts within each were invited to participate and provided equal opportunity to respond in an effort to curb any potential sample bias.

### **Member Checking**

Interviews were recorded utilizing Zoom recording software and iPhone recorder app as a back-up. These recorded interviews, stored on the researcher's password protected computer, were immediately transcribed by Zoom software for coding and analysis upon completion of member checking. During member checking, a copy of the individual's transcript was provided for their feedback on its clarity and accuracy. Of the six participants in the sample, none withdrew or disallowed their transcripts to be utilized for the purpose of this study.

These recordings were also used as a means to ensure accuracy and giving participants an opportunity to review what was said. In addition to recordings, the written transcription of individual interviews was shared with each participant utilizing secure email. Data relating to school districts represented in the study, attributes of the respondents, and information about the considerations utilized in the placement process were extracted from the interviews.

### **Analysis Method**

Upon completion of the six Zoom interviews, the researcher compared transcripts generated by Zoom with videos. Listening to the interviews a second time, the researcher captured words not accurately transcribed by the software. These transcripts were then sent to each participant for review as noted in member checking. These transcripts and recordings were the basis for data collected and analyzed in this interpretive qualitative phenomenological study. Transcripts were read several times and significant themes, including common phrases and experiences, were noted. During a second viewing of the video recordings of interviews, notes were taken in the margins of transcripts. Transcripts were read without the video a third time and

more notes taken. These notes then became the basis for emergent themes: safety, progress on goals, medical needs, disability category, and money. Texts were then re-reviewed, color-coded, and categorized according to these identified themes, including emotions shared or noted by the interviewer in the interview which were colored green. An example is that all six participants noted safety as the primary factor driving out-of-district placements, so as this theme emerged, transcripts reflecting this theme were coded in yellow. A visual map was utilized to demonstrate relations of themes and relational significance (see Appendix C).

Transcripts were uploaded into Writewords, a word frequency counter for texts. When participants were asked to identify the top three factors they consider, the three most frequently utilized words were safety (46), progress (24), and medical (17). These were consistent with three of the five themes which emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts, safety, progress on goals, and medical issues. For the sake of confidentiality, participants were assigned letters A-F. “The last step of the structured phenomenological traditional method of analysis is the long paragraph; the researcher must write a mini statement that tells the audience (readers) “what” the research participants have experienced and “how” they experienced the phenomenon in a contextual format” (Alase, 2017, p. 17).

### **Presentation of Results**

Each of the interview participants offered insight into their experiences and practices given their individual circumstance. The six directors averaged 9.5 years of experience and represented six different geographic regions of Maine recognized by Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC). On average each director places approximately 2.5 students out of district per school year and interviews offered insights into this

process and the thoughtful approach each take. Participants seemed open, honest, and candid about their thinking and thoughts.

The participants represented different districts, both geographically and demographically (see Table 1).

**Table 1 – District geographic and demographic characteristics**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years as Director</b>	<b>District Information</b>
A	6	Small, rural, western Maine
B	12	Large, urban, central Maine
C	6	Medium, rural, southern Maine
D	13	Medium, coastal, southern Maine
E	15	Medium, rural, northern Maine
F	5	Small, suburban, central Maine

Participant A represented a smaller rural school district with a travel time of over an hour to the nearest day treatment program option standing in stark contrast to Participant B, representing a large urban district with a number of placement options. Both participants C and D represented medium-sized districts. Participant C's district was rural with a limited number of placement options, while Participant D's district was coastal with multiple placement options. Participant E represented a mid-sized rural community with multiple placement options. Participant F represented a smaller suburban community with multiple placement options. Interviews with each of these participants offered distinguishable themes.

## Themes

Salient findings based upon these interviews included the themes, safety, progress, medical needs, disability category, and finances. Based on findings in this study, safety was the primary or most important factor in the process hierarchy. The notion that students are making progress in their individual program was also a primary consideration. Complex medical needs were also a factor for most districts in placing students out-of-district. Administrators did not report finances as a factor in this process, but all identified availability (both openings and potential fit) as a factor. The disability category of students in these placements varied greatly from district to district, but all identified safety.

### Safety

“Safety is my number one concern. If a student started to hurt other people, students, staff, or themselves, then that is a priority...” stated Participant A. This was a consistent message from each of the directors in the interviews. Participant B said the typical student placed out of district was identified as needing, “specific behavioral health treatment with co-occurring disorders. Or often students who might be medically fragile.” When asked what considerations were made in the determination of need for these out-of-district placement, Participant B’s response was, “safety.” Participant C stated that the typical student placed out-of-district presented with, “Autism and behavioral needs that cannot be served in the typical school environment.” Participants D, E, and F, all shared similar sentiments, though participant D talked about working in a district previously where the, “Superintendent would not approve any day treatment placements.” After safety, progress was also a clear factor in the process.

## **Progress**

Lack of progress on Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and program outcomes was identified as a factor by each participant, though some seemed to distinguish between IEP goal progress and progress in student's program. Participant C identified this using the word, "benefit." When asked what considerations were made in the determination of need for out-of-district placement, Participant A answered, "The level of engagement by the student and school administration." This likely relates to directly to progress as it is unlikely that much would be made by an unengaged individual. Some needs cannot be met in a typical school environment and directors identified students with complex medical needs as often requiring these out-of-district placements.

## **Complex Medical Issues**

Students with "multiple disabilities or medically complex" were identified as the students most often placed into day treatment programs by Participant D. Four of the participants discussed the challenges of students who presented with complex medical needs that could not be safely managed in a typical school environment. Participant F stated that they have, "a couple of students who need hospital level of care while participating in their education program." There did not seem to exist any other correlation between a diagnosis/special education disability category and the outplacement of students. Each district appeared to have their own typical student presentation that might require consideration of out-of-district placement. Participants emphasized the ability and efforts of the district to create and adapt current programs to meet students' needs. Participant C identified the types of placements and availability of slots as the biggest obstacles in placing a student out-of-district. This participant also identified the cost of creating a program internally versus the cost of an out-of-district placement as a potential factor.

The sustainability of a student's program within a district was also identified as students requiring these more restrictive programs often, "present with challenging behaviors that can burn staff out or hurt them."

### **Mental Health**

Students with mental health needs were identified as the most likely group to be placed out-of-district. Participant E said that they try to "create a program to meet any student's needs." They identified space as a barrier sometimes to creating internal programs, but that out-of-district placement was really an "absolute last resort" and only after the potential of all internal options had been exhausted. This Director identified safety, progress in program, and potential for growth as the biggest factors in determining if a student should be placed out-of-district.

### **Finance**

As for a financial factor, Participant B said, "while I'm a fiscal agent of the district and I have a priority to watch that money is spent responsibly, this is never a factor if the need is present." This was echoed in other interviews with Participants C, E, and F. Participant E felt as though conversations about out-of-district placements are "part of the continuum of services offered, so the team usually knows when we are exhausting other options." This participant did not think money is a factor in the process, "though everyone knows how expensive placements can be." Least restrictive environment and trying to "keep a student in district to the extent possible" were both also identified by Participant A as factors. At "no time," did this participant feel as though costs factored into the placement decision making process. "If the need is there, the money is found." This was consistent with how participants answered questions around factors such as relationships with families of students, community status, legal pressure, or those sorts of factors potentially playing into the placement process. All denied that these factors were

considerations within the process. Director C, “did not feel as though those factors potentially played into the placement process.”

### **Hierarchy of Factors**

When asked what the three most important factors in determining an out-of-district placement, participants’ answers were relatively consistent: Participant A identified safety and the ability to access education in current environment; Participant B identified safety, internal capacity, and lack of progress; Participant C identified safety, least restrictive environment, and risks/benefits; Participant D identified progress on behavioral and academic goals, safety of everyone, and available resources; Participant E identified safety, need, and availability; Participant F identified safety, progress in program, and potential for growth. The consistency with which these factors were identified and the order of them seems to suggest that a hierarchy of considerations does exist for at least primary variables.

### **Summary**

The willingness of Directors to share their experiences in the out-of-district placement process during interviews garnered a good deal of information. The similarities between responses from Director to Director was striking, especially given the relative uniqueness from region to region. Safety was the resounding primary factor in the decision-making process. Directors were very clear that the safety of the student, staff working with them, and peers, were paramount.

Each participant identified lack of progress on IEP goals within a school districts’ continuum of programs as another important factor, though this was conveyed in different ways. Only two Directors used the term least restrictive environment, though it was clear each had a good working understanding of the tenets of LRE. Complex medical needs that could not be met

within a typical school were another reason for placement which was identified by four of the six participants.

In addition to the five previously identified themes, two others of relevance were: the importance of monitoring LRE and re-visiting if a student is ready to come back into a district from an out-of-district placement and available classroom/ specialist space as an obstacle to creating internal programs/capacity. None of the Directors felt as though funding was a factor that played into the decision-making process, which is consistent with IDEA regulations. There were far more similarities than differences in terms of considerations identified by the participants. How these factors were identified, characterized, and talked about varied, but were similar despite the geographic location of a district, the size, or even availability of out-of-district placement options. Factors that might infringe upon regulatory guidelines appeared to be far less of a consideration than thought. Money, while a consideration, was not a factor in whether students were placed out of district. The notion that community members of status, those with professional representation, or personal relationships might have preferential treatment or play a role in factoring into the process was denied by all of the participants.

Consistency from interview to interview of factors identified by participants was remarkable. Descriptions and vocabulary might have varied, but themes were quite discernable. Each of the participants emphasized safety as an important consideration. This appears to be the primary factor driving out-of-district placements. The often-unsafe behaviors leading to these placement decisions could be linked to underlying mental illness, trauma-response, or any number of causes, many of which were discussed during interviews. Access to treatment for mental illness was a concern of participants as was access to proper medical care and facilities for the medically fragile student population. While the utilization of the conceptual framework

appeared to align with factors in this study, aspects specific to Bourdieu's Field Theory did not. The ability to account for the emotional aspects of these decisions, while clearly important, were indiscernible relative to the process. While all participants were clearly passionate about their work, in the context of these interviews (at least), emotion did not seem to play a role in the placement process. This is consistent with findings in the literature review, in particular the explicit listing of factors not to be considerations in the process, identified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

As described to the Maine Department of Education by the Maine Education Research Policy Institute in a 2016 report on special education costs, from 2011-12 to 2015-16 school years, the percentage of students requiring special education services in Maine grew from 15.6% to 16.7%. With this growing percentage, comes growing costs. This same report states that students in out-of-district settings are considered “high cost out-of-district placements” for funding purposes and cost at least four times the average cost of educating an in-district special education student. Given the geographic diversity of participants’ school districts, variations in availability of placement options, programs, and resources were all factors in the placement process. How these factors, among others, weigh into the decision-making process for each individual district ultimately varies from system to system and administrator to administrator. Information and data garnered from individual interviews of a geographically diverse group of administrators aid in understanding this process for each individually and collectively. Findings from this study can inform and improve practice or potentially help districts look at ways to create and expand internal capacity.

### **Interpretation of Findings and Recommendations**

Each Director had different disability types that were more frequently places out-of-district than other types, so there did not appear to be one dominant category. This was the area with the most diversity in responses. As it stands to reason, districts emphasize and grow different types of programs internally based upon student needs and this likely drives some schools to have better behavioral programs, ASD programs, or other types of programs. A likely consequence is that some student profiles might be better served than others within a district. For

example, a school district might have a particularly strong program for students with autism spectrum disorder with specialized staff and training. The collaboration of local regional school districts seems particularly important in these circumstances. The ability of school leaders to collectively look at populations and create and provide an array of programs is crucial to students having appropriate access to the programs they need to meet their individual needs. An increased number of programs' or schools' ability to provide these services internally might improve outcomes for this student population.

Safety was the resounding issue leading to out-of-district placements. This indicates that if educators can better identify how to safely program for students, more students could remain in district. Physical intervention programs, such as Ukeru, potentially provide staff with safer alternatives to more typical physical restraints when a student's behavior has escalated and become unsafe. This begs the question for school administrators, are behavior plans and support for such, robust enough and provided with enough fidelity to ensure students are provided a reasonable opportunity to realize educational benefit?

Communication amongst special education and regular education administrators is vital. Often school-building level administrators are un-involved in the special education process or services. An unanticipated consequence can be that they are less supportive of alternative plans or placements within their buildings. Awareness that staff are getting overwhelmed and/or there a sense that the student should already be placed elsewhere can all play into the success (or failure) of a student within a program. The culture that is created in these situations is central to the success of students' programs. School administrators need to be intentional about their communication and understand the relative importance of being as effective at listening.

Understanding what these out-of-district placements are providing that might be replicated in a public-school setting or public day program might help increase internal capacities for a district. How can we help students be more successful within their districts? Educators should always have a lens towards LRE and should be asking the question, is it time to move a student back to a district school? Districts and administrators should be asking all of these questions routinely.

School staffs should look at their internal capacity to provide safe programs for students with exceptional needs. Research or evidence-based practices should be utilized for intervention practices. Physical intervention programs should be identified clearly and provided with consistency and fidelity. Districts should look at programs within their regions and find ways to share programs and resources to try and program for students in the least restrictive environment possible. In some cases, bringing in external trainings and expertise to build sustainable long-term programs could be in the interests of both students and communities.

This study has prompted a recommendation for further study of a number of topics, such as:

- How are schools without access to external programs able to successfully program for students who might be placed out-of-district if they lived closer?
- How might more explicitly defining the size of school districts and other variables for use in additional interviews?
- More closely examine potential correlations between resources, experience, etc. and placements.
- The impacts of administrative changes on the number of out-of-district placements, or the transition of students out-placed back into their own community schools.

- Impact of race/gender on placement in Special Purpose Private Schools.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study and findings are significant to those involved in out-of-district placements or the process. Insights of this process from and information from these interviews is often anecdotal. To quantify these factors and insights is perhaps the biggest implication of this study. Other implications of the findings in this study might include:

- Educational administrators' further understanding of this process, the factors involved, and how they are weighed.
- A further appreciation for how complicated the process is and can be.
- A resource for parents and anyone with an interest in special education process to better understand the placement process, variables at play, and further inform these potential placements.
- Help day treatment programs in meeting consumer needs and better understand the pressures of school districts.
- Prompt discussion within IEP teams about the process and what that looks like within a specific school.

### **Conclusion**

Maine does not have a statutory requirement for someone to have certification as a Special Education Administrator (030). That being said, almost every district employs a special education administrator with this certification. This speaks to the complexity of special education and processes such as that for out-of-district placements. Thankfully, there appears to be a good deal of consistency in Maine school districts with regard to the out-of-district placement process.

For educators and parents of students with complicated special education needs, it is important to understand the implications of LRE and out-of-district placements. As discussed previously, schools are compelled via IDEA to exhaust all internal capacity for providing an appropriate program for a student before an out-of-district placement can be considered. Length of school days, number of days of programming, and other factors might make alternative placements seem like attractive options for parents and the instinct might be to jump to that level of intervention, however regulations prohibit this. Findings from this study promote a thoughtful approach and understanding of this process for those who might not otherwise recognize or understand the many facets and of potential considerations. The best interest of schools, students, families, and communities is to make informed decisions based on a clear understanding of regulations, process, and practice. This study supports those interests.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. How many students do you place out-of-district on average per year?
2. What types of identifications do these students have that require these placements?
3. To what extent do external placement options impact placement decisions?
4. In your experience, who generally initiates a conversation about placing a student out-of-district?
5. What sorts of considerations do you make in determining if a student requires an out-of-district placement?
6. How do factors such as relationships, community status, or legal counsel play into the process?
7. Assuming a student's needs cannot be met in-district, what other factors do you consider?
8. What are the barriers to creating internal capacity for these students placed out-of-district?
9. What role does cost factor into the placement of students?
10. If you had to select the three most important factors in determining the placement of a student, what would they be?

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent to Participate

Title of Research Project: *STUDENT PLACEMENT DECISION-MAKING*

*PROCESS: A STUDY OF ADMINISTRATOR CONSIDERATIONS*

Principal Investigator: Jonathan R. Normand

Phone Number of Principal Investigator: (207)871-1200

#### A. Purpose and Background

Jonathan Normand, Ed. D candidate at the University of New England, is conducting research in the area of out-of-district student placement. The purpose of your participation in this research is to help the researcher understand the hierarchy of factors in the out-of-district placement of student process utilizing an interpretive phenomenological approach. Your participation is requested as a Special education administrator in the State of Maine with potential experience in the process of placing students out-of-district.

#### B. Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur: you will be contacted via email to arrange an interview time. An electronic invitation will be sent as a follow up with details, including the interview questions. On the day of the interview, each will last for approximately 40 to 60 minutes and will be tape recorded. These will be transcribed within a week and sent to you for verification before use in any research activities.

#### C. Confidentiality

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All transcripts and notes will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Research information will be kept in locked files at all times. Only the researcher will have access to the files and any electronic data will be stored on a password protected device. After the study is complete, all records will be confidentially destroyed.

#### D. Benefit of Participation

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this research study. The anticipated benefit of your participation in this study is to help the field understand the complexities, factors, and process related to the out-of-district placement of students in the State of Maine.

#### E. Voluntary Participation

Your decision whether or not to participate in this study is voluntary and will not affect your relationship with the University of New England. If you choose to participate in this study, you can withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

#### F. Questions

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Jonathan Normand by calling (207)850-1451. You can also contact Brian Lynn; Director of Research Integrity at [blynn@une.edu](mailto:blynn@une.edu) or (207) 602-2244 with any questions about the rights of research participants or research related concerns.

CONSENT YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY AFTER READING ALL OF THE INFORMATION ABOVE AND YOU UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION IN THIS FORM, HAVE HAD ANY QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND HAVE RECEIVED A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR YOU TO KEEP.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Visual Map of Emergent Themes

SAFETY

PROGRESS ON GOALS/PROGRAM

MEDICALLY FRAGILE STUDENTS

DISABILITY CATEGORY

MONEY

Safety- All six participants identified safety of students and staff as a primary driver for these placements.

LRE- is always at the forefront of the decision process- Is there appropriate progress on goals?

Despite differences in size, region, and proximity of placements, there was surprising consistency in how

the process is looked at and applied

Money, legal pressure, community pressures/influence do not play a role.

There is no one profile of a student placed out of district. The disability identification varies greatly.

Medical Issue- both medically fragile students with complex physical health needs were identified along with students with behavioral/mental health needs...these could be clustered or looked at individually.

-students requiring hospital level care could not be met in a typical school setting, behavioral or mental health needs might be able to be met in a school setting.