



District Skills Programs Review - Report

Introduction

This review, completed in the spring of 2026, is an exploration of three district-level programs for students with complex developmental needs in NLPS. The review process included gathering feedback from parents/caregivers, students, and staff to develop recommendations that will enhance experiences within these programs for students and families, moving forward. Additionally, this review aims to align the programs with the NLPS commitment to inclusion, as well as district strategic priorities. The three programs reviewed are: Resilience, Inclusion, Skills and Engagement (RISE) program at Rutherford Elementary, Elementary District Skills program at Georgia Avenue Elementary, and Secondary District Skills program at Nanaimo District Secondary School.

Context

Enrollment in these district programs includes close collaboration with families to consider their goals for their child, where significant medical, behavioural or developmental complexities make it challenging for students to access their learning in typical classroom settings. For example, students may rely on augmentative communication devices, receive in-class nursing support due to medical needs, support with toileting and feeding, and individualized behavioural safety plans.

The purpose of these programs is to provide highly personalized, intensive support for students, with a focus on functional literacy, numeracy, and life skills within meaningful social contexts. Currently, the RISE program has more students who are oral communicators as compared to the other two district programs; thus the program has an additional focus on social-emotional learning and navigating peer relationships.

Each program typically registers a maximum of 12 students, staffed by a full-time Inclusion Support Teacher and a ratio of one Education Assistant/student. The programs also receive a half-day of weekly support from a Speech Language Pathologist, assessments to support transitions to adult services from a School Psychologist, and consultative support from the Inclusion Support Team, as needed. Where required, individual students also receive services from the Teacher of the Deaf-and-Hard of Hearing and Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments.

As the two District Skills programs have existed for some time, it is possible to look at longer range trends in enrollment. In these programs, once enrolled, students have typically remained for the duration of their school journeys. In contrast, the recently developed RISE program was designed as more of a transitional setting, where students would develop the stamina and skills required to transition back to their neighbourhood schools after one or two years with the program.

Within the last couple of years, most learners have attended their neighbourhood schools for at least 1-2 years before transferring into the specialized settings of district programs. Referral to these programs currently comes from students' neighbourhood schools. Where the school team and parents/caregivers feel that additional support is necessary, the school principal reaches out to the district team, and a final determination is made at the district level. On rare occasions, with direction from the district team, students enroll directly into a Tier 3 program from an independent learning center or another school district.

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Current Student Enrollment

**Specific numbers have been masked to preserve student privacy*

	RISE	Elementary District Skills	Secondary District Skills
Current Enrollment	11	10	14
*Designation Profiles	Cat. G (Autism) Cat. H (Int. Beh)	Cat. A (Phys. Dep) Cat. G (Autism)	Cat. A (Phys. Dep) Cat. C (Mod. Int. Dis) Cat. G (Autism)
Indigenous Learners	23% of students across all three programs identify as Indigenous		
Enrollment History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students attended neighbourhood schools previously Additionally, there are students who have had a combination of home-schooling or have attended an independent learning center, and have transferred into this program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently, all students attended neighbourhood schools previously Historically, there have been students who were home schooled prior to transferring into this program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most attended neighbourhood schools previously Several enrolled directly into Elementary District Skills as kindergarten students Additionally, there are students who have had a combination of home-schooling or have attended an independent learning center, and have transferred into this program All students are completing Evergreen Certificates as part of this program 3 students are in year 12+ and do not attend full time due to engagement with other community services

Collaboration with Ministry of Children and Family Development

There is ongoing collaboration and engagement between parents/caregivers, staff, and the Children and Youth with Support Needs (CYSN) team. Some students participating in District Skills programs may be in the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Most typically, families have engaged in either full or part-time voluntary Ministry care via Special Needs Service Agreements, due to the complexity of supporting their children within the family home. Most families receive at least some respite on a weekly or monthly basis.

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Further Data Gathering

Parents/caregivers, staff and students provided input about *physical and social environments, teaching and learning practices, supports and partnerships, transitions, and referral processes* for this review in the following forms:

1. **Survey** (responses were received from 16 parents/caregivers of current students, 28 staff working directly in or supporting the program and one community partner)
2. **Focus Group** (composed of four parents who accepted the invitation to participate after completing the survey, representation from all three programs)
3. **Classroom Visits** (staff and students from all three programs shared additional thoughts and observations with the reviewers in focused discussions)

Themes Based on Responses

After reviewing all three forms of data, responses about the perceived supports and barriers to student experiences within the district programs were grouped, based on consistent themes that emerged. These themes represent important facets of the lived experiences of the students, parents/caregivers, and staff within these programs. The themes below represent meaningful “clusters” of ideas and comments, rather than a collation of all actual responses.

Students

Many students attending these programs were unable to provide oral or written input. Where this was not possible, their voice was gathered through observation and feedback from their close caregivers and staff. The themes that emerged were:

- **Peer connections:** students want to have the opportunity for parallel play, as they often experience subtle friendships—they know when someone is not there, will choose to sit across the table from certain peers, or go into a quiet space with one another
- **School community experiences:** students appreciate opportunities to participate in electives, assemblies, gym, music opportunities, classroom buddies, they identify friends in other classes in the school
- **Community experiences:** students demonstrate enjoyment and engagement with outings such as the pool, community walks, transit outings, applying community-based life skills (e.g., shopping, ordering in a restaurant), special events such as Musical Mixer, Special Olympics
- **Complex peer dynamics:** participating together with peers can be difficult when chosen friends become escalated, which can lead to feelings of isolation or conflict on occasion

Parents/Caregivers

- **Shared experiences of frustration and isolation:** parents/caregivers struggle to navigate their children’s complexity, often leading to feelings of isolation from other parents, frustration with barriers to accessing services in the community and respite care and the need to re-tell their children’s stories over and over to various service providers; often feel disconnected from school because their children use the bus, minimizing opportunities to interact with staff

- **Impact on other learners:** parents/caregivers want their children to interact with other learners, value their children being members of the broader school community, both for the experience of belonging, as well as to nurture compassion and empathy amongst all students
- **Relationships with staff:** parents/caregivers value ongoing and open communication about their children's experiences; goodness of fit in terms of supporting staff's approach and their children is important, including need for specialized training for staff and a deep knowledge of appropriate strategies and interventions
- **Physical environments:** parents/caregiver feel there is need for calm, sensory-friendly spaces; students need access to break out spaces and individual work areas (it can be difficult when it is too open); there needs to be a balance between accessing less stimulating spaces and having gentle exposure to more stimulating environments

Staff

- **Physical environments:** staff value calm, flexible, low-stimulating spaces, access to purposeful spaces/defined areas for individual learners; some rooms are crowded and there are limited breakout spaces; inconsistent access to indoor gym/movement spaces; accessibility concerns (e.g., lifts, ramps, locking doors, access to accessible washroom and kitchen spaces)
- **Teaching and learning structures:** staff emphasize the need for small group and 1:1 support; structured-predictable routines, well-matched peer connections; embedded, functional life skills learning, interest-based academics
- **Staff to staff relationships:** staff emphasize benefits of strong teamwork, positive EA collaboration and coordination with itinerant specialists, school leadership; frequent staff changes are negatively impactful
- **Transitions:** staff appreciate thoughtfully planned visits, tours, sharing of information; staff note that class program configuration varies year-to-year based on student needs; earlier planning for transition to adulthood is needed
- **Training needs:** staff would like greater knowledge of augmentative and alternative communication, *Pathological Demand Avoidance*, de-escalation strategies, implementation of functional curriculum
- **Communication and partnership:** staff identify a need for consistent family engagement, clearer roles and more systematic collaboration with outside agencies

Recommendations

Based upon the review of the themes that emerged from the data gathered as part of this review, each of the six facets of these programs that input was gathered about (i.e., *physical environments, social environments, teaching and learning practices, supports and partnerships, transitions, and referral processes*) are addressed with a recommendation for action, as follows:

1. **Physical environments:** Complete a fulsome gap analysis of space and equipment needs in these district programs.
2. **Social environments:** Expand intentional opportunities for students enrolled in these programs to engage across the school and broader community.

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3. **Teaching and learning practices:** Support implementation of evidence-based practices for functional life skills curriculum and assessment.
4. **Supports and partnerships:** Formalize mechanisms for interagency collaboration and information sharing with community partners.
5. **Transitions:** Create a transition “road map” as a shared resource for staff and parents to understand what to expect at times of transition into or out of these programs.
6. **Referral processes:** Establish and communicate clear inclusion and referral criteria for these programs that are responsive to current student needs.