

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SPECIAL EDUCATION  
REFERRALS: INITIAL REFERRALS RESULTING  
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PLACEMENT

by

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**ABSTRACT**

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**Common Characteristics of Successful Special Education Referrals: Initial**  
**(Title)**

**Referrals Resulting in Special Education Placement**

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Every year there is increasing pressure on school districts to provide more services to their students with fewer funds. In order to maintain high quality programs school districts need to assess current programs and provide the services through the most effective means possible. The purpose of this study was to identify common characteristics of initial referrals to Special Education, which result in placement to Special Education. The research for this study focused specifically on five key areas. The five key areas included: the criteria for qualifying for special education, the referral process of special education, factors affecting special education placement, the funding of special education, and the impact of the special education referral process on the stress of teachers.

Special education is defined as the “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Federal Register, 1999, pg. 12425). Special education plays an important role in the public education process. With school districts facing impending budget cuts, schools are left with questions about how to fund the school system. Further research indicated that not only are special education enrollments rising; the special education costs per student also appear to be rising (Parrish, 2001).

Another area of importance is the recruiting and retaining of quality teachers for special education. With the increase in the number of special education referrals an increasing pressure is placed on special educators. Research revealed special education teachers are especially “at-risk” of stress and burnout and up to 10% of special educators leave the teaching profession (Singer, 1993).

With pending budget cuts and teachers facing burnout it is increasing important to provide efficient programs. This study identified the most common characteristics of successful special education referrals within a small school district. The study revealed that a majority of the successful referrals were males. Students referred for a Speech and Language Disability or Emotional Disturbance were most likely to be placed into the special education program. Finally the majority of successful referrals were Elementary students referred by their teacher within the first quarter of the school year. By identifying these common factors the school will have a good foundation for evaluating the efficiency of the special education program. Furthermore the school will be able to utilize their resources most effectively to ensure a high quality special education program.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Every year there is increasing pressure for school districts to provide more services to their students with dwindling funds. In order to maintain high quality programs, school districts are assessing current programs to ensure the services are being provided as effectively as possible. Special education is a prime example of a program mandated through laws, rules, and regulations to provide a wide array of services. Often school districts struggle with a lack of funds to provide these services. Although federal and state funds contribute to the special education program more pressure is being placed on local districts to fund the special education program (Parrish, 2001). School districts are struggling to provide a balance between providing comprehensive services while maintaining cost effective programs. This study will assess the effectiveness of the special education referral process of one school district.

There is a lot of research available regarding special education. For the purpose of this study the research is focused specifically on the referral process and factors regarding the referral process. The enactment of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 developed the framework for the special education process. The referral process of special education requires specific school personnel to provide “an appropriate evaluation” (P. L. 94-142). Educational resources and qualified personnel are increasingly valuable to school districts, yet qualified personnel are increasingly difficult to recruit and retain, especially in the field of special education (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999). Ideally the majority of a special educator’s time is spent in direct services to the students, yet “many

special educators reported that increases in caseloads corresponded with simultaneous increases in meetings and paperwork demands” (Russ, Chiang, Rylance, & Bongers, 2001, pg. 162). Although the assessment process of a special education referral is necessary, if the referral does not result in a placement to the special education program the assessment may take valuable time away from other students. It is unrealistic to assume that each referral to the special education program will result in a placement to special education, but by minimizing the unsuccessful referrals, valuable resources can be utilized elsewhere. Furthermore by identifying common characteristics of successful referrals to special education I will also be able to identify characteristics of unsuccessful referrals. Both conclusions provide valuable information to the school district. By identifying characteristics of successful and unsuccessful referrals the school district will be able to assess the best way to increase successful referrals and decrease the unsuccessful referrals. Additionally, the school district would be able to provide in-service training and support to all teachers regarding the special education referral process. Furthermore, I hope the results of this study will provide the school district with the ability to provide effective programs while utilizing all personnel resources efficiently. This can be accomplished by minimizing the assessments and paperwork of unsuccessful referral, therefore allowing teachers to utilize their time in direct service to students.

### Statement of the Problem

The school district has been dissatisfied with the effectiveness of their current referral process. Furthermore the number of unsuccessful referrals has been an area of concern for the school district. The purpose of this study was to identify common

characteristics of successful initial referrals to the special education program, referrals which result in the placement of a student in the special education program, as measured by the frequency of each characteristic gathered from the initial referral data of a small northern Wisconsin school district's special education program. This study will focus on the following objectives:

1. The common characteristics of successful referrals to the special education program, referrals that result in a placement in special education.
2. The common characteristics of unsuccessful referrals to the special education program, referrals that do not result in a placement in special education.

#### Definition of Terms

1. IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
2. IEP: Individual's Educational Plan
3. LRE: Least Restrictive environment
4. FAPE: Free Appropriate Public Education
5. Related Services: services provided to a student yet are not the primary disability.
6. Special Education: educational services provided, through Public Law 94-142, to all students with disabilities
7. LEA: Local Educational Agency
8. Successful Referral: initial referral to special education that resulted in placement into the special education program
9. Unsuccessful Referral: initial referral to special education that does not result in a placement into the special education program

10. Student Study Team (SST): team that considers cases individually and prescribes prereferral interventions for the student
11. IEP Team: group of individuals involved in the evaluation and re-evaluations of a student referred to special education

### Limitations of the Study

1. The data analysis of this study included data from one school district and conclusions can only be drawn for that school district.
2. Data was utilized from one school year and may not represent trends over time.
3. The school is a small school in northern Wisconsin.
4. The school population consists largely of Caucasian students with few minority students.
5. The school is located in a rural community.
6. A majority of the students come from families of low-income status.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

In reviewing the literature regarding special education referrals, five key areas of importance were noted. The five key areas include: the criteria for qualifying for special education, the referral process of special education, factors affecting special education placement, the funding of special education, and the impact of the special education referral process on the stress of teachers.

#### Criteria for Qualifying for Special Education

In 1975 Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, mandated a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, ensured due process rights, and mandated Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Least Restrictive Environments (LREs). In 1990 amendments were added to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and the law became known as IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Additional amendments to IDEA were made in 1997; this is the current law that governs special education in the schools today. According to Telzrow (1999), “the IDEA Amendments of 1997 introduced some of the most sweeping changes in federal law since the enactment of Public Law 94-142 in 1975” (pg. 7). There are six principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that provide the foundation of the special education services. These principles are a free appropriate public education (FAPE), an appropriate evaluation, an individualized education plan (IEP), the least restrictive environment (LRE), parent and student participation in decision-making, and procedural safeguards.

According to IDEA (1997), when a child is referred to special education under IDEA three procedures have to be followed in sequence:

1. The child has to be qualified as eligible for special education and related services by meeting criteria for one of the sanctioned disability categories.
2. A free appropriate public education (FAPE) must be provided for in the formalized individual education plan (IEP).
3. The setting in which FAPE is to be accomplished is to be specified in keeping with the principle of least restrictive environment (LRE).

The evaluation must be provided by a team of people, which must include at least one teacher or specialist knowledgeable about each area of the child's suspected disability. The evaluation must be individualized and the child must be assessed in all areas of suspected disability. Tests and evaluation materials must be provided and administered in the child's native language or mode of communication. Schools "qualify children as special education eligible by essentially "matching" child characteristics to the criteria specified in the state regulations in efforts to determine whether a child is eligible for special education" (MacMillan, Gresham, Bocian, & Siperstein, 1997, pg. 2). In order to qualify for special education the student must meet specific criteria for at least one of the following thirteen categories "The thirteen categories of disabilities identified in the law are: autism (A), specific learning disability (LD), speech or language impairments (SpL), emotional disturbance (ED), traumatic brain injury (TBI), visual impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI), deafness (D), mental retardation (MR), deaf-blindness (D-B), multiple disabilities (MD), orthopedic impairment (OI), and other health impairment

(OHI)” (deBettencourt, 2002, pg. 17). If a child meets the criteria of one of these categories, the team must also determine if the child is “in need of special education services”. The referral can become a lengthy and time-consuming process. In his article, Smith (2002) observed, “although much about IDEA has been good, it has evolved into a bureaucratic nightmare for schools. The paperwork that is currently required has become overwhelming, often to the point that its completion impedes the provision of appropriate services to the student the law is intended to serve” (pg. 6). Although the referral process is time-consuming there is no guarantee the child will qualify for special education. “Every day, solitary teachers in general classrooms struggle without success to help students who have been designated as ineligible for special education services because they do not fit one or more of the abnormal classification criteria” (Audette & Algozzine, 1997, pg. 382). Nonetheless, schools are required to provide an appropriate evaluation to all students referred to the special education program.

### Special Education Referral Process

Any person can refer a child to the special education program within their school. Furthermore, students attending private schools or students that are home schooled are entitled to special education services. Although the referral may originate from a variety of sources the most common sources of special education referrals are the general education teachers, guidance counselors, and parents. Once a referral is made to the local educational agency (LEA) the agency is responsible for notifying the child’s parents of the referral and providing an appropriate evaluation. Schools often develop a referral process individualized to their school district. “Before a child is referred for formal evaluation, efforts are made to remedy the child’s learning and/or behavior problems in

the regular education setting” (MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocian, 1996, pg. 134).

This effort to alleviate the difficulties is often called “prereferral interventions”.

### Factors Affecting Special Education Placement

There are three main factors that affect special education placements are; gender, ethnicity, and professionals’ stereotypes. Males tend to be referred to special education more often than females. This seems to be especially true of young male students, boys with late birthdays. MacMillan et. al., (1996), reflects “the long-recognized overrepresentation of males in system-identified categories of at risk and mild disabilities” (pg. 145). According to Del’Homme, Kasari, Forness, & Bagley (1996), “finding indicated that boys were referred more than girls to student study team and particularly for behavioral problems” (pg. 272).

Although minority students seem to be referred at the same rate as other children, the placement of minority children into special education programs is at a higher rate than that of other students. According to MacMillan et. al., (1996), there is “no overrepresentation of minority students at the referral stage, yet pronounced overrepresentation of minority children actually placed in educable mental retardation (EMR) programs” (pg. 131). One would expect to find this to be true prior to IDEA and its’ revisions. Yet recent research reflects the same results. In 1996, MacMillan et. al., reported “a higher percentage of the minority students referred to the Student Study Teams (SST) will subsequently be found eligible for special education services” (pg. 146). One could reflect the referral process is not uniform for all students.

Furthermore professionals’ stereotypes of students affect the placement of students in the special education programs. The regular education teacher’s decision to

refer a child is the single most important decision that is made in the assignment of children to learning disabilities programs (MacMillan et. al., 1996). Teachers may be good predictors of their students in need or their perceptions of the student as having a disability may carry through the evaluation process. Since a regular education teacher must be involved as part of the IEP team, most often the referring regular education teacher is involved in the process. According to Ysseldyke (2001), “the referral and entitlement decisions were more heavily influenced by naturally occurring student characteristics (gender, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, and the political power or social influence of students’ parents) and the extent to which student behavior bothered teachers, than they were based on the scores students earned on tests” (pg. 300). Therefore the perception of the professionals involved in the team plays a large role in the placement of a student to special education. The stereotypes of students held by professionals, whether it is a student can achieve success or a student has a disability, affects the students’ outcomes (Ysseldyke, 2001).

Although other factors affect student placement into a special education program, these three factors play a key role in the placement of a student to a special education program following a referral, therefore they are the important factors in this study.

### Education and Budgets

Funding public schools is a very complex process that involves federal aid, state revenues, and local property taxes. Over the years, Wisconsin schools have struggled to balance the budget while maintaining quality programs. Along with the past year, the upcoming years of Wisconsin school budgeting promises to be a difficult, lengthy process. Threats of program cuts and teacher lay-offs are common school board dilemmas. The

State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Elizabeth Burmaster, echoed this dilemma by stating, “Even before the ink dried on the 2001-2003 biennial budget signed into law on August 30, 2001, questions regarding how we fund our PK-12 public school system persisted” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2002, pg. 1). Special education costs have been on the rise due to the increase of the number of students in special education and the increased cost of special education (Parrish, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, the number of students participating in special education has increase by 47% between 1977 and 1995. Although the large increase of students placed in special education during this time is often attributed to the increased accessibility of special education and the revisions of IDEA, the number of students placed in special education continues to rise. Parrish stated, “From 1988-89 to 1998-99, special education enrollments grew about twice as fast as those of all students (33% versus 15% growth)” (pg. 7). Furthermore Parrish indicated that the special education costs per student also appears to be rising. As I stated earlier, funding for special education is provided through federal, state, and local funds. The federal funds available for special education are not what were expected. “Congress has not lived up to its commitment to fund up to 40% of the costs of educating students with disabilities” (Smith, 2002, pg. 6). Furthermore the state share of special education funding decreased (55% to 47%), and the burden on local funding sources increased (39% to 45%) (Parrish, 2001). Wisconsin’ Evaluation of Special Education Funding (1999) report cites rising special education costs of nearly 37% between 1992-93 and 1997-98. With more pressure on the local school system to provide funding for special education some schools are reacting. “In California, a nearly \$2 billion claim filed by school districts

against the state for insufficiently funding special education was just settled” (Parrish, 2001, pg. 5). Other states are following suit. As the burden of funding for special education is shifted to the local sources, in Wisconsin, the possibility of an increase in local taxes to support the public schools seems to be a necessity. According to Burmaster (2001), “the continuing affordability of maintaining two-thirds, the impact of revenue caps, and the declining reimbursement rate of special education costs” the need for an efficient referral process and delivery of services is a necessity (pg. 1).

### Teacher Stress

As I previously described, special education teachers are intricately involved in the referral and evaluation process of special education. The special education teacher has a multi-faceted role including teaching special education students, case managing the students on their case load, developing and following the IEP for each student, as well as evaluating new special education referrals. The stress of general education teachers is quite high and a concern for schools. Many schools have developed a teacher-mentoring program to provide additional support to new teachers (Whitaker, 2000). Special education teachers seem to be especially “at-risk” of stress and burnout. “Retaining experienced and accomplished special education teachers continues to be one of the most distressing issues our profession faces” (Embich, 2001, pg. 58). There is a growing concern regarding the “critical staff shortages in special education” which has resulted in “increased attention to the issues of recruitment and retention of qualified special education teaching staff” (Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996, pg. 336). In 1993, Singer found “10% of all special educators left teaching and revealed that the average special educator abandoned education as a profession within 6 years of beginning teaching” (pg. #).

Cooley & Yovanoff (1996) also noted that “work-related variables tend to be better predictors of commitment and job satisfaction. . . examples include excessive paperwork requirements, increasing caseloads, low salaries, lack of administrative support, role conflict or ambiguity, challenging student behaviors, and lack of visible student progress” (pg. 337-338). With the increase in the number of special education referrals an increasing pressure is placed on special educators. The pressure to provide a multitude of services in a demanding job with limited time available has resulted in less student contact. “Eighty-seven percent of special educators reported that they did not have enough time to spend with each individual student during the 1998-99 school year” (Russ et. al., 2001, pg. 162). Thus finding ways to manage paperwork and work efficiently has become increasingly important. According to Smith (2002), “the paperwork that is currently required has become overwhelming, often to the point that its completion impedes the provision of appropriate services to the students the law is intended to serve and encourages special education teachers to leave the field” (pg. 6). It is increasingly important that special education teachers are able to minimize time spent away from the student and be available to serve the students. Stress due to poor job design is found when the teacher’s belief about the job (i.e. working with students) is different from the realities of the job (i.e. burdensome paperwork, extensive time spent in meetings, etc) (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). The amount of time spent doing paperwork and attending meeting often leads to a frustration of being unable to spend time with the students. Thus referrals that do not result in a placement to special education amplify the stress due to poor job design. “Teacher turnover has long been of concern in both special education and general education because it represents instability

in the teaching force and raises the prospect of shortages of qualified replacement teachers” (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber 1997, pg. 390). With the increase in accountability in the education field through the ESEA legislation, teacher stability and regular teacher contact is of increased importance. Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002, suggested universities may consider designing a dual degree program in general and special education. This may assist in preventing teacher turnover.

The laws surrounding special education provide a rigid framework which school must provide services to all students with disabilities. The referral process is an important piece in providing quality service to all students. It is important for schools to develop an effective and efficient ways to refer students to their special education program while providing a minimal disruption to the special education program itself. Although there are factors affecting the placement of students in the special education program it is important to provide a consistent program for all. By decreasing the stress of teachers and providing an efficient referral process in which one can see results the school will be able to provide a quality program through a cost effective process.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

This study consisted of reviewing pre-existing data from initial referrals to the special education program of a small northern Wisconsin school district. Furthermore the data were assessed to determine the common characteristics of special education referrals resulting in a placement to a special education program.

#### Procedure

Utilizing the information available on the Special Education referral form, the researcher collected the data during the summer of 2002. The cumulative data were from all initial special education referrals from the 2001-2002 school year. Data were separated into categories and common characteristics of successful referrals were identified. Likewise, common characteristics of unsuccessful referrals were identified.

The characteristics included in the data analysis were:

- Gender
- Type of the Referral, i.e. Speech and Language disability, Learning disability, etc
- Time of the referral (school year quarter)
- Grade level of the student at time of the referral (Elementary, Middle, or High)
- Source of the referral

Each initial referral was reviewed and tally marks were used to denote which characteristics the referral contained.

#### Methodological Limitations

1. The data analysis included data from one school district and conclusions can only be drawn for that school district.

2. Data was utilized from one school year and may not represent trends over time.
3. The school population largely consists of Caucasian students with few minority students.
4. A majority of the students live in families of low-income status.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

#### Descriptive Statistics

The data utilized for this study was collected via the Special Education referral form of one small district in northern Wisconsin. The majority of the students in the district were Caucasian with few minority students. Due to the low number of minority students, in an attempt to protect confidentiality, ethnicity or race was not reported as a category. The school was located in a very rural area of northern Wisconsin and a majority of students come from low-income families.

During the 2001-2002 school year there were 42 referrals made to the Special Education program. Of the 42 referrals, 86% (36) were successful referrals, while 14% (6) were not placed in the Special Education program. Regarding the total referrals, 71% (30) were male and 29% (12) were female (see figure 1). The students who were referred for Special Education were referred for a total of seven different disability areas. The referrals consisted of 45% (19) for Speech and Language Disability (SpL); 10% (4) for Severe Developmental Delay (SDD); 17% (7) for Emotional Disturbance (ED); 22% (9) for Learning Disability (LD); 2% (1) for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI); 2% (1) for Other Health Impairment (OHI); 2% (1) for Hearing Impairment (HI) (see figure 2).

The majority of the referrals (71% or 30 students) were initiated for Elementary students (see figure 3). Of these 30 students, 67% (20) were males and 33% (10) were females. Students referred from the Middle School comprised 22% (9) of the total referrals. Of the Middle School students, 89% (8) were males and 11% (1) were females.

The High School referred only 3 students, 67% (2) were males and 33% (1) were females.

### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by determining the frequency of each designated characteristic of special education initial referrals. There were a total of 42 special education referrals made during the 2001-2002 school year. Of the 42 referrals, 86% (36) referrals were successful referrals and resulted in placement to the special education program. Therefore, 14% (6) referrals were unsuccessful referrals and did not result in placement to the special education program. The criteria were established into five main areas. Each area was then broken into categories of characteristics. The five areas and categories of characteristics were as follows:

- Gender: male or female
- Type of Referral: Speech & Language Disability, Severe Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Learning Disability, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impairment, or Hearing Impairment (students were not referred under the other disability categories)
- Grade Level: Elementary, Middle School, or High School
- Source of Referral: Guidance Counselor, Teacher, Parent, or Other Provider
- Time of Referral: Quarter 1, 2, 3 or 4 (School year quarter)

More males than females comprised the successful referral group; 72% (26) were male, while only 28% (10) of the successful referrals were female (see figure 1). This reflects a fair representation of the total sample overall; 71% (30) of the total referrals to

special education were males. Of the students that did not qualify for special education 67% (4) were male while 33% (2) were female.

Regarding the Type of Referral the most frequent characteristic was Speech and Language Disability. Overall Speech and Language Disability was the most referred area of disability. Of 42 total referrals, 19 (45%) of the referrals were for a Speech and Language Disability. Of the successful referrals, 47% (17) were placed into the Speech and Language program, while only 2 students (33%) did not qualify for the Speech and Language program. All students referred for Emotional Disturbance were placed into the special education program and they made up 19% (7) of the successful referrals. The largest discrepancy of students placed versus not placed occurred in the Learning Disabilities category. Students referred for a Learning Disability made up 17% (6) of the successful referrals to special education, but the concerning factor is that students referred for a learning disability made up 50% (3) of the students that did not qualify for special education (see figure 2).

A large majority of the referrals, 71% (30 students) came from the Elementary level grades. Of the students referred from the Elementary level 67% (24) of the students were placed into the special education program. In this study, all students who did not qualify for special education were from the Elementary level (100%) (see figure 3).

Teachers were the main source of referrals for special education (43%); although parents often requested a referral as well (36%). These percentages were consistent with both successful and unsuccessful referrals. Of the successful referrals 42% (15) were from teachers while 36% (13) were from parents. Regarding the unsuccessful referrals; 50% (3) were from teachers and 33% (2) were from parents (see figure 4).

The majority of the referrals occurred during the first quarter of the school year (45% or 19 referrals). The quarter with the least amount of referrals was the fourth quarter with only 10% (4) of the referrals occurring during this time. Of the successful special education referrals, 42% (15) occurred during the first quarter while 67% (4) of the unsuccessful referrals occurred during this time (see figure 5).

### Summary Statement

This chapter focused on the presentation of the data collected from the referral forms of students referred to special education. The research findings revealed of the 42 initial referrals 86% (36) were successful and 14% (6) were unsuccessful. Furthermore more males were referred for special education than females. Likewise more males were placed into the special education program than females. The majority of the special education referrals were for a Speech and Language Disability. The referrals for Emotional Disturbance were the most successful and resulted in all students referred for Emotional Disturbance being placed in the special education program. The least successful area of referral was a student referred for a Learning Disability. Although 17% (6) of the successful referrals were referred for a Learning Disability, 50% (3) of the unsuccessful referrals were referred for a Learning Disability.

Teachers made a majority of the initial referrals during the first quarter of the school year. Furthermore a majority (71% or 30 students) of the referrals were for students in the Elementary grades.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

#### Introduction

This chapter will discuss the conclusions drawn from the data results and the recommendations made from the conclusions.

#### Discussion

The school district evaluated for this study was concerned about the number of referrals made to the Special Education program which did not result in placement to Special Education (unsuccessful referrals). During the previous school year (2000-2001) 60% of the students referred for Special Education were placed into the Special Education program (Special Education report for the school, 2001). This study revealed that a majority of the referrals (86%) made to Special Education for the 2001-2002 school year resulted in placement.

This study revealed that a majority of the referrals, as well as the placements to Special Education, were male students. This is consistent with other research findings.

According to Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001), in their study to examine the proportion of males and females admitted to special education services, males accounted for two-thirds of their total sample. Likewise MacMillan et. al., (1996), in their comparison of students nominated for pre-referral interventions, found an overrepresentation of males among students who are at risk for or who are found to have a disability.

Furthermore Del'Homme et. al., (1996), reflected "that boys were referred more often than girls to student study teams and particularly for behavioral problems" (pg. 272). This study revealed that all of the students referred for Emotional Disturbance

100% (7) were males. Although the research indicates that boys are referred for behavioral problems more often than girls, this may be an area for additional research. Are girls being over looked in the referral process? Another explanation could be that due to the small sample size there were no girls with Emotional Disturbance in need of identification.

According to MacMillan, et. al. (1996), the regular education teacher's decision to refer a child is the single most important decision that is made in the assignment of children with Learning Disability to special education programs. Furthermore Ysseldyke (2001), stated that the "referral and entitlement decisions were more heavily influenced by. . . extent to which student behavior bothered teachers" (pg. 300). The data from this study indicates that of the 18 students referred by teachers to the Special Education program, 83% (15) were placed in Special Education and 17% (3) were not. Therefore the data is consistent with the research. Although 50% (3) of the "unsuccessful referrals" were made by teachers, this information may be misleading. Since only 6 students were not placed in the Special Education program the small number will inflate when converted to a percentage. Although 50% of the "unsuccessful referrals" were made by teachers, it consisted of only 3 referrals made by teachers that did not result in placement to the Special Education program.

Due to the pressure on schools to provide more of the Special Education funds through local funding, schools are assessing the referral process to create efficient and cost-effective referral processes (Parrish, 2001). Furthermore an efficient referral will assist in the decrease of teacher stress and frustration. According to Cooley & Yavanoff (1996), it is vital that schools work to recruit and retain qualified Special Education

teaching staff. A large majority of Special Education staff cited they did not have time to spend with individual students (Russ et. al., 2001). By establishing an efficient referral process teachers will be able to minimize the time attending meetings and evaluations and therefore will be able to spend more time with individual students.

This study provides the school with a foundation in which to assess the Special Education programs efficiency and cost-effectiveness. By looking at the number of referrals that result in placement to the Special Education program the school can assess what facilitated these successful referrals. Furthermore by assessing the “unsuccessful referrals” the school may look to areas of improvement to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the Special Education program. Additional teacher training regarding the special education referral process and the criteria for qualifying a student for special education may assist in decreasing the number of unsuccessful referrals. Likewise older/more skilled teachers may be more likely to provide a successful referral.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The objectives of this study were to determine the common characteristics of successful referrals to special education and the common characteristics of unsuccessful referrals to special education. The most common characteristic of referrals to special education was that a majority of the referrals were male. The research indicates males are referred more often than females, although this may not be surprising the number of males referred for special education were quite high (71%). This was consistent in both successful and unsuccessful referrals, although the number of females in the unsuccessful referrals was slightly higher (33%).

Students referred for Emotional Disturbance (100%) or Speech and Language Disability (89%) were most likely to be placed into the special education program. While one-third (33%) of the students referred for a Learning Disability did not qualify for special education.

A majority of the referrals were made of students in the Elementary grades and their teachers made a majority of the referrals during the first quarter. Parents in this study comprised a significant number of referrals (36%). This indicates that parents are becoming more aware of and involved in the special education placement process. Furthermore parents are reminded that “you (parents) are your child’s best advocate” (Pierangelo & Jacoby, 1996, pg. 44).

This study gives the school a snapshot of a year of special education referrals. It raises some interesting questions that the school district may wish to pursue in the future. The questions that this district and others may want to explore further:

- Are there differential methods for identifying males versus females for special education?
- What training opportunities should be made to increase understanding regarding Learning Disabilities?
- What training opportunities should be made to increase understanding regarding Speech and Language Disability?
- What developmental differences might account for the unsuccessful referrals at the elementary level?
- What were the success rates of last year? Are they consistent?

Although this study provides only a glimpse of the special education program, it provides the school with a good foundation to start an evaluation of the special education referral process.

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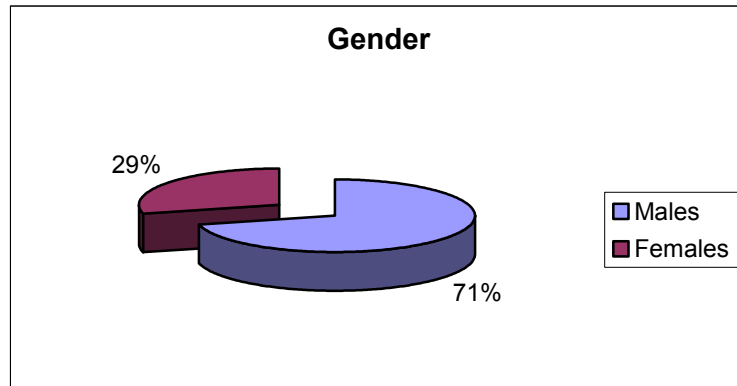
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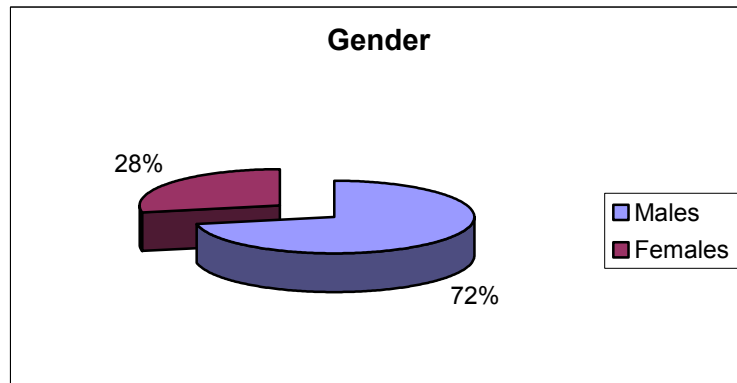
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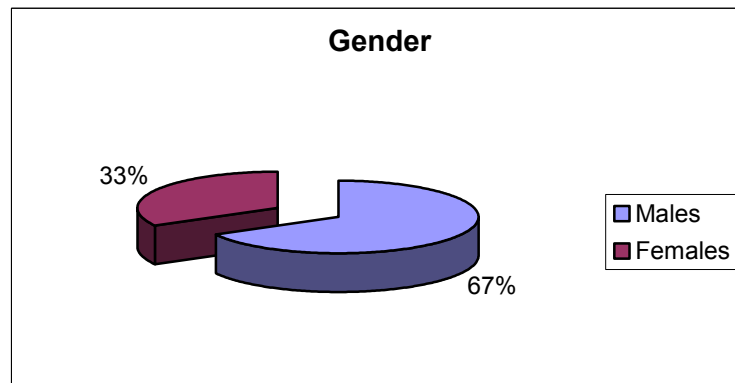
Figure 1



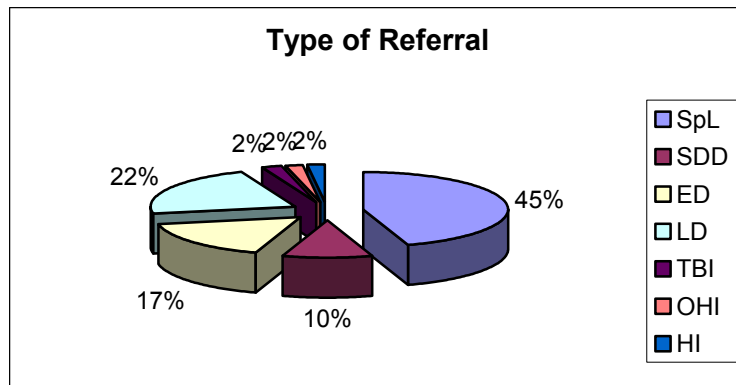
- Percentage of males and females of the total number of referrals to special education



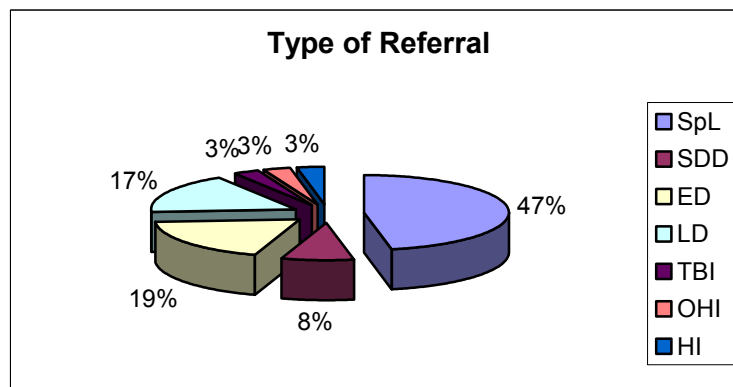
- Percentage of males and females of the successful referrals to special education



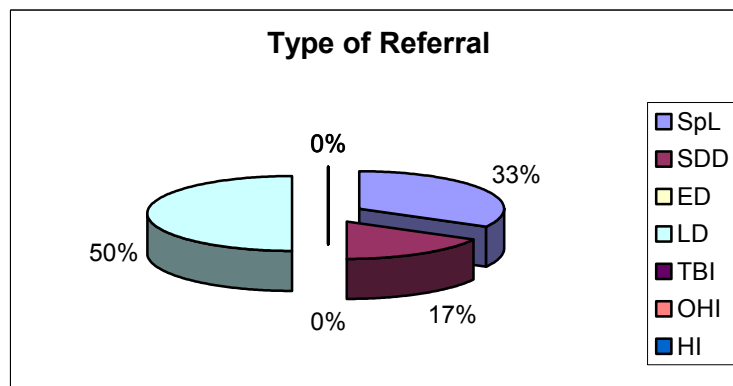
- Percentage of males and females of the unsuccessful referrals to special education



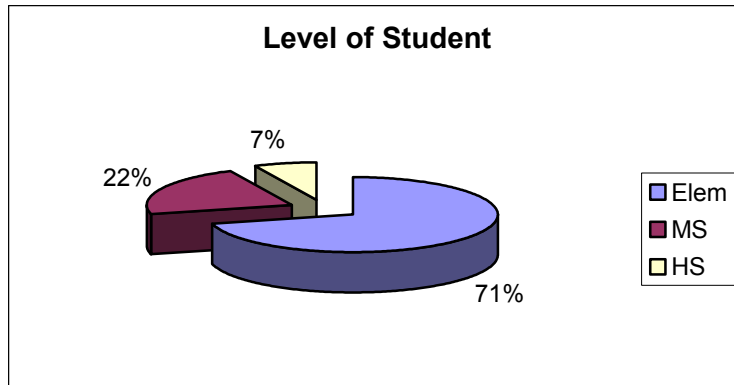
- Percentages of type of referral of the total referrals to special education



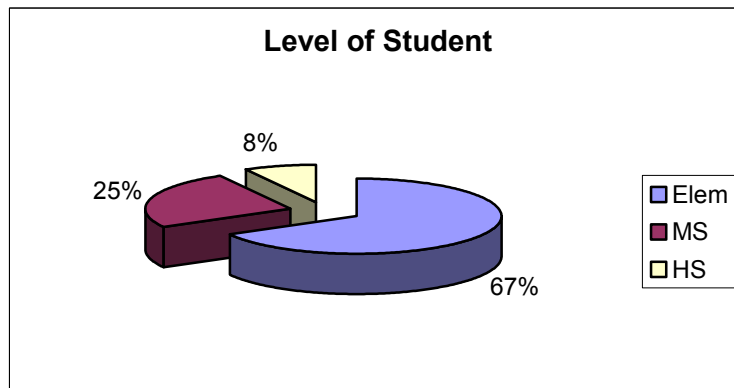
- Percentages of type of referral of the successful referrals to special education



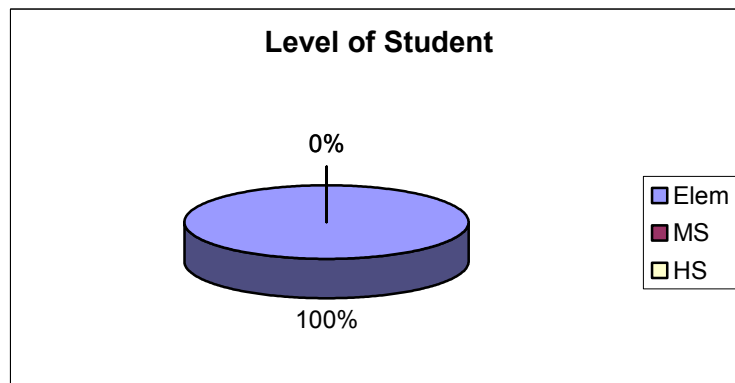
- Percentages of type of referral of the unsuccessful referrals to special education



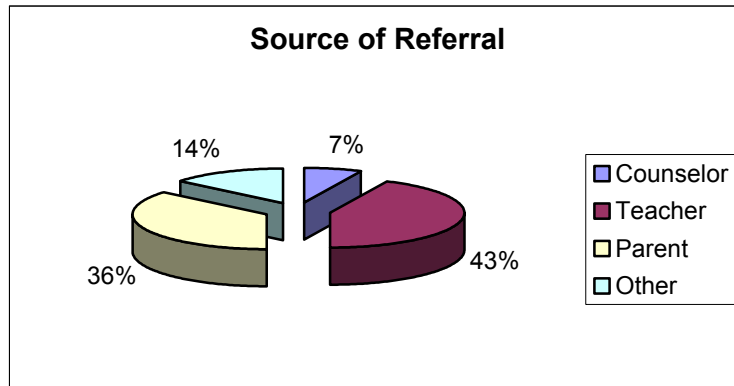
- Percentage of the level of the students of the total referrals



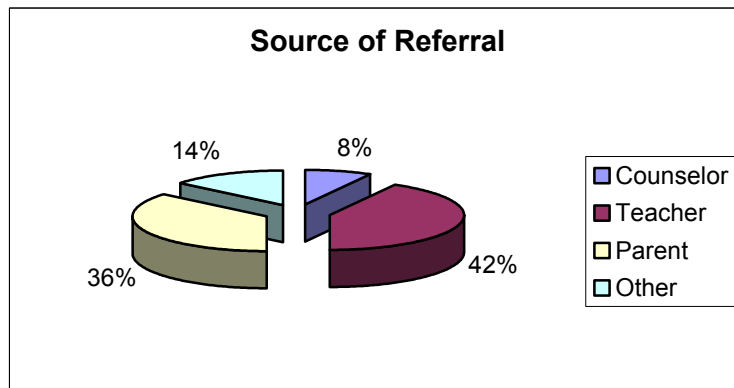
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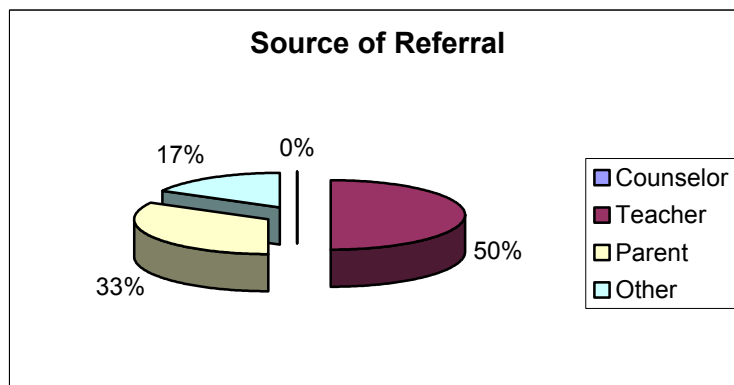
- Percentage of the level of the students of the unsuccessful referrals



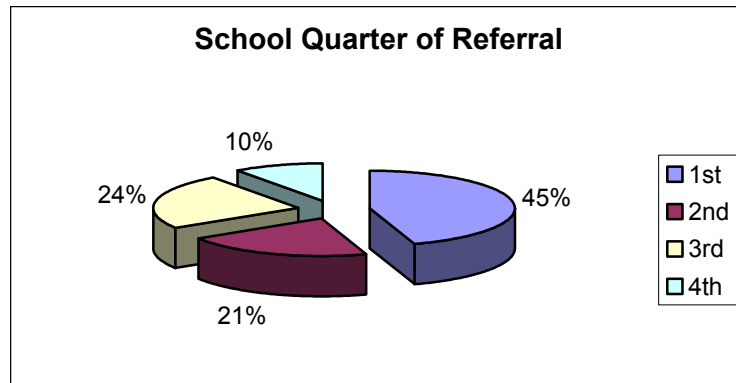
- Percentage of total referrals by source of the referral



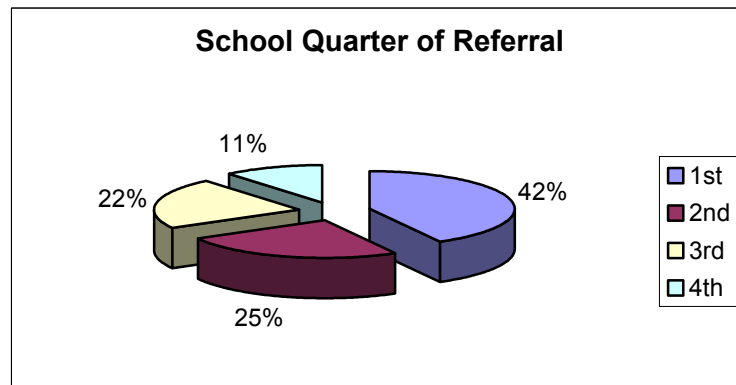
- Percentage of successful referrals by source of the referral



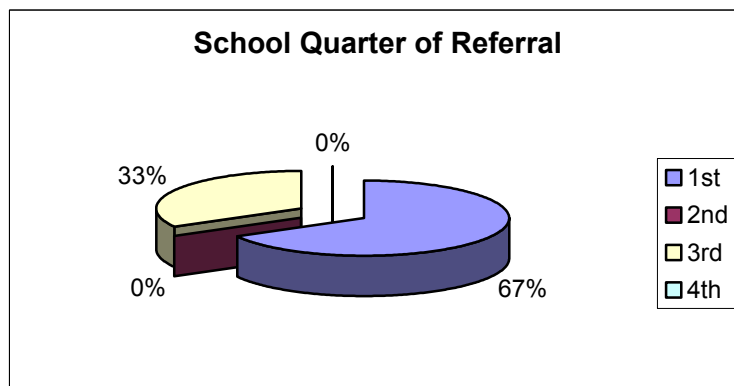
- Percentage of unsuccessful referrals by source of the referral



- Percentage of total referrals by school year quarter



- Percentage of successful referrals by school year quarter



- Percentage of unsuccessful referrals by school year quarter