



Autism Programmatic Environmental Rating Scale (APERS) Results

The Autism Program Environment Rating Scale (APERS) assesses the quality of educational programs for children and youth with autism. It is well documented that the immediate school environment in which autistic students participate has direct influences on their learning and behavior. High-quality programs for students with autism share common characteristics or indicators, which set standards that can serve as best practices. The APERS assesses those features of the school and program environment that are likely to be influential, and the information collected through the assessment process can be used to improve the quality of educational programs for children and youth with autism.

The APERS is available in two versions: the APERS-PE for preschool and elementary programs and the APERS-MHS for middle and high school programs. The APERS domains include learning environments, positive learning climate, assessment and IEP development, curriculum and instruction, communication, social competence, personal independence, functional behavior, family involvement, and teaming. Below is a brief description of the domain and subdomain areas assessed:

Learning Environment: The Learning Environment domain assesses the classroom and school setting features that support the learning and engagement of children and youth with autism. The dimensions of the Learning Environments include Safety, Organization, Materials, Visual Schedules, and Transitions.

Positive Learning Climate: The Positive Learning Climate domain assesses the degree to which the instruction and staff interactions are positive and nonpunitive. It also includes an examination of the representation of diversity in curriculum materials.

Assessment and IEP Development: Assessment is the basis on which individualized programs for students with autism should be planned. In this section, the rater evaluates the quality of the assessment process, the use of assessment to measure student progress, and the development of IEP goals. This domain also includes the degree to which programs include planning for students' transition between schools.

Curriculum and Instruction: The items for the Curriculum and Instruction domain are designed to assess the teaching process and specific practices the school or program uses to support students' learning and accomplishment of IEP goals. The area addresses setting up the instructional session, types of prompts used and prompting procedures, use of visual supports during the lessons or learning sessions, sensory accommodations, opportunities to respond, and use of task analysis.

Communication: Communication is a significant challenge for students with autism. It is one of the defining features of autism. As such, providing a strong emphasis on communication skills is an essential feature of school programs for most students with ASD. Items in this domain assess the richness of the communication environment, the planning process for intervention, individualized instruction that focuses on communication, the responsiveness of teachers to students' communicative attempts, and, for some students, the use of an augmentative and alternative (AAC) communication system.

Social Competence: This domain assesses features of the program that support student's social interactions and relationships with peers. Like communication challenges, social challenges are a hallmark of autism. Dimensions of programs that reflect quality are arranging the environment to create opportunities for social interactions, teaching and modeling, and implementing peer social network activities.

Personal Independence and Competence: Students with autism sometimes depend on adults to prompt their engagement in instructions or activities of daily living. An important feature of programs for students with autism is to provide accommodations that support independent engagement, self-advocacy, and self-management.

Post-secondary Transition Planning: The emphasis in middle school, especially high school, increases on preparing students to transition out of high school and into the community. This domain focuses on conducting assessments of skills needed in the post-high school setting, developing observable and measurable goals that appear in transition plans, and providing opportunities to engage in transition. The Post-secondary Transition Planning domain was not accessed during the evaluation.

Interfering Behavior: Rigid and repetitive behaviors are another defining feature of autism. A feature of program quality is how staff can plan and carry out programs that address behaviors that interfere with and limit student engagement in learning activities. Behavioral assessment, behavior management, and data collection procedures are areas assessed within the domain.

Family Involvement: The relationship that exists between the school and family, as well as family members' active involvement in the student's program, is a key feature of special education programs in general, and especially programs for students with autism. Such involvement is fostered by family members becoming a part of the interdisciplinary team that plans the student's program, ongoing and routine communication with family members, and scheduled meetings between the student's teachers and family members.

Teaming: Educational programs for students with autism are designed and implemented by interdisciplinary teams of professionals, which also include family

members. The organization of the team and communication among team members are important contributions to the overall quality of programs for students with autism.

The APERS data collection process involves record reviews, interviews, and direct observation of the learning environment. The APERS guides program improvement by indicating areas of strength and areas that may benefit from professional development and coaching.

Setting: Mokena Elementary School

Principal: Rachel Chorley

Date: 5/15/24, 5/17/24

APERS Facilitators:

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The Autism Professional Learning and Universal Supports (A+) project facilitated an APERS program evaluation across three classrooms at Mokena Elementary School, utilizing the APERS-PE protocol. The data collection process consisted of reviewing the IEPs of 5 students and observing students in the school setting. Observations occurred in the early childhood, kindergarten, and first-grade classrooms. Interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, a speech-language pathologist, and the principal.

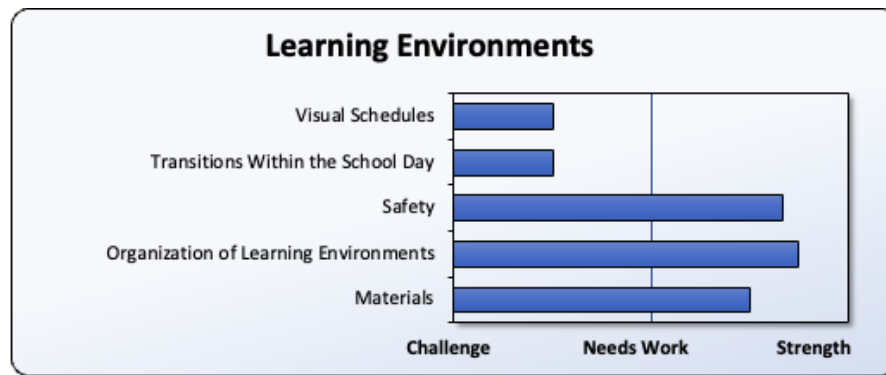
The graphs below highlight the overall APERS profile. On each graph, the line on the left represents a 1 rating, the line in the middle represents a 3 rating, and the line on the right represents a 5 rating. An item score of 1 or 2 represents poor quality, or there are missing indicators evident in the environment; an item score of 3 represents acceptable quality; and an item score of 4 or 5 indicates high-quality programming and implementation.

Areas of Strength

Listed below are the indicators of program strength identified during the observation. Each area contains a description of the domain, example items, and observations the facilitators noted.

Learning Environments

The Learning Environment domain assesses the classroom and school features that support the learning and engagement of children and youth with autism. The dimensions of the Learning Environments include Safety, Organization, Materials, Visual Schedules, and Transitions. The graphs below highlight the Learning Environment subdomain results.



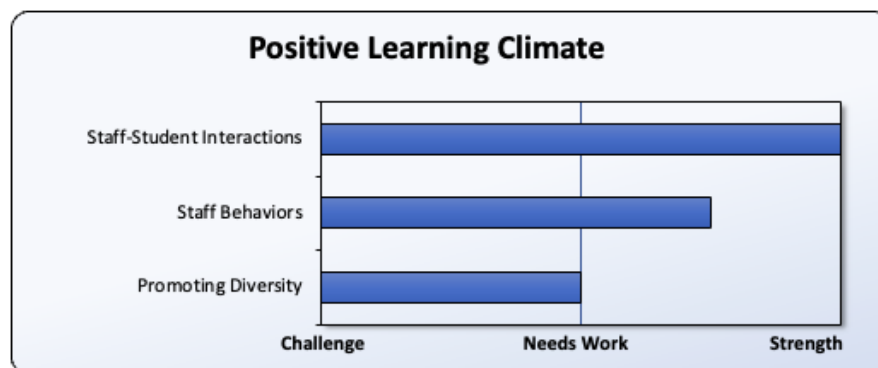
Safety strategies were in place, evidenced by outlet covers in calming corners, and floors were clear from clutter or potential tripping hazards. Classroom spaces were structured and not overcrowded to support student transitions throughout the room. Physical boundaries existed in classrooms to support students' understanding of activities in those specific areas of the classroom. In all classrooms observed, areas of the learning environment were labeled, helping to define what activities occur in each location. Each student had their own space to store their personal belongings, either in cubbies in the hallways or at their desks. Classroom environments were well organized, and materials were stored away.

Although the Learning Environment domain was a strength, Visual Schedules and Transitions Within the School Day would be two subdomain areas targeted for growth. Visual schedules provide a clear overview of daily activities, helping students and staff to understand what is expected of them throughout the day. Visual schedules facilitate independence, decrease stress levels, and bring awareness to upcoming events. Both group and individual visual schedules are present across all classroom environments. Each student should transition to their schedule, check the schedule, and move to the location of the next activity. Instead, Visual Schedules are often manipulated by staff members instead of individual students. Adult support and prompting should be faded as quickly as possible to promote ownership and independent usage of individual student schedules. Some individual schedules were matched to the support needs of individual students, but only for some students. It is important to determine what type of visual representation system each student understands best. Different system levels include actual objects, digital photos of the objects, black and white icons, color icons, line or hand drawings, and written words. Some children may need different visual representation levels in different situations, but all students should not be using the same type of schedule. Icon and written schedules were observed, but not schedules that are more foundational, such as photo or object schedules. The goal of matching a schedule

to the student allows them to independently transition throughout their day, moving from one activity to another using the schedule rather than relying on someone else to lead them or verbally prompt them to the next activity. Additionally, schedules were used very inconsistently across all learning environments. Instead, adults were observed prompting students throughout the school day and sometimes referenced a student's schedule. Increasing the implementation of visual schedules would support better transitions within the school day. Visual Schedules and Transitions Within the School Day subdomains of the Learning Environment are areas to prioritize for coaching support.

Positive Learning Climate

The Positive Learning Climate domain records positive interactions, including staff-to-student interactions, staff behavior, and whether the interactions between staff and students demonstrated respect for the diversity of all students. It notes whether student efforts are acknowledged with necessary individualization [individualized reinforcement systems]. Diversity is observed through activities and within the environment. The graphs below highlight the positive learning climate subdomain results.



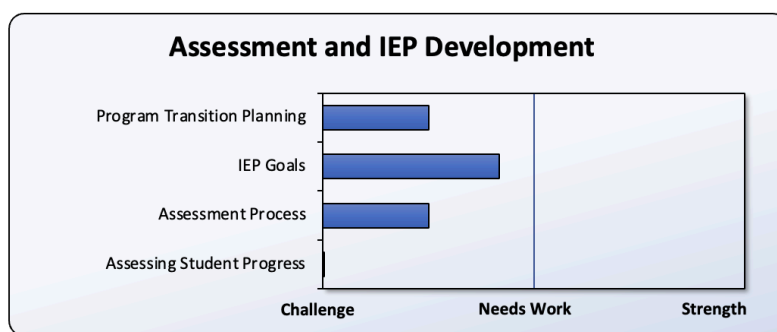
Two of the three subdomains of the Positive Learning Climate domain were identified as strengths, including Staff-Student Interactions and Staff Behaviors. Team members greet and acknowledge students cheerfully upon arrival and in the hallways. Team members acknowledged students' efforts in various ways, formally (token systems) and informally (verbal praise and high-fives). Through parent interviews as part of the data collection process, parents reported that the staff at Mokena Elementary School are very complementary to their students.

Areas Recommended for Growth

Listed below are areas where program quality could be improved. Each area contains a description of the domain, example items, and suggestions for program improvement.

Assessment and IEP Development

Assessment is the basis on which individualized programs for students with autism should be planned. In this section, the rater evaluates the quality of the assessment process, the use of assessment to measure student progress, and the development of IEP goals. This domain also includes the degree to which programs include planning for students' transition between schools.

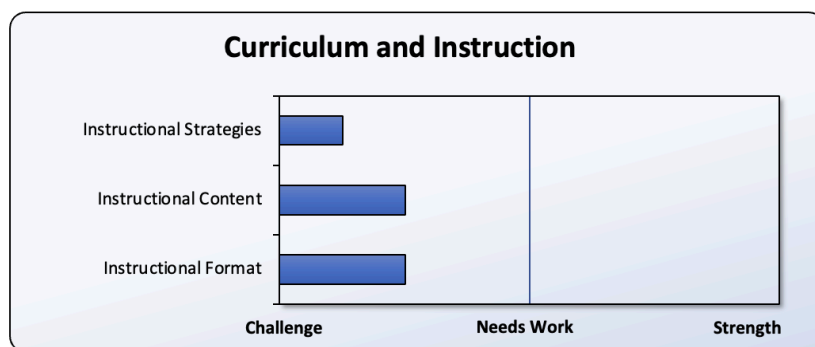


IEP reviews and interviews indicated that students are assessed with Fastbridge Math and Reading assessments, and students with higher support needs are assessed with the Verbal Behavior and Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP). Through interviews with teachers, it was found that there is a lack of formal training on assessment tools, and the data gathered are not used to guide or inform instructional decisions and the writing of IEP goals. Mokena Elementary School staff should use assessment data as a guide to planning for their students' instruction and writing IEP goals. During observations of classrooms over two days and interviews with school staff, IEP goal data is collected by only the classroom teacher during one activity (a scheduled IEP goal time), and one teacher reported that IEP goal data is not collected consistently. Staff should consider planning activities where student IEP goals can be embedded into instruction across the entire school day to encourage the generalization of skills and provide training for paraprofessionals on collecting IEP data throughout the day. Furthermore, data collection systems targeting academic goals should be implemented and designed to capture information that can inform instructional decisions.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Curriculum and Instruction domain identifies whether students with autism have access to an evidence-based curriculum aligned with state learning standards and the general education curriculum. The curriculum should be adapted to the student's individual characteristics, such as age, abilities, and learning preferences. Students

should participate in instruction emphasizing developing skills across multiple domains, including academics, communication and language, self-determination, self-regulation, self-monitoring, social relationships, and play and leisure skills. Instructional methods



include the different ways staff engage students in the learning process. Multiple instructional formats were observed, including direct instruction, small groups, dyads, 1:1 instruction, student-initiated interactions, teacher-directed interactions, independent work, play, and peer-mediated instruction. Instruction is designed to meet specific IEP goals and objectives. Instructional strategies result in meaningful outcomes by promoting high rates of participation, fostering communication and social interactions, and emphasizing skill generalization and maintenance of learned skills across settings and individuals.

During the visits, some instruction was tied to IEP goals, and IEP goal work was built into the daily schedule. One teacher was observed differentiating instruction, using visuals in the delivery of instruction, and adapting and modifying instruction based on the learner's needs. Instruction in the early childhood classroom was play-based; however, some activities might have benefited from increased structure to increase engagement. It should be noted that observations occurred during the final days of the school year, and the evaluators may not have observed what instruction typically looks like. This will be further explored during coaching.

Instructions given to students were mainly verbal; other instruction formats, such as written or picture instructions, were only observed in one classroom. One teacher was observed utilizing manipulatives to match academic content to individual student needs; however, this was not observed across learning environments. In one classroom, instructional periods may have been too long for some students' ability to attend and remain engaged. The use of a clear prompting hierarchy was not observed; only one form of prompting was observed being used with students, which was verbal prompting. Overusing verbal prompting can cause students to become dependent on the additional verbal prompts to initiate a task and can be extremely difficult to fade. As a student learns and becomes more familiar with a skill, staff should fade their level of prompts and use the least intrusive prompt necessary to support the student with learning the skill. Visual

supports are present in classrooms at Mokena Elementary School, but implementation is inconsistent, and the supports are not implemented with fidelity across environments. Multiple instructional formats were observed in all classrooms, including teacher-led whole-group instruction, small-group, and 1:1 formats.

Personal Independence

The Personal Independence and Competence domain highlights the use of adapted supports, including accommodations and modifications to existing instructional materials, resources, or tools that reflect students' individual needs to enhance independence within the educational environment. The domain also highlights how the goals a family has for their child are prioritized and integrated into the student's IEP and instruction. Self-advocacy skills are part of instruction and are targeted throughout the learning environment. Learners are provided choices-making opportunities (i.e., what to work on, activity choices, who to work with, etc.). Strategies that promote personal independence are implemented (i.e., prompting methods, visual schedules, break cards, video modeling, etc.). Learners also monitor their behavior and are encouraged to request help or initiate a sensory break to self-regulate. The curriculum and instruction should systematically support independence.



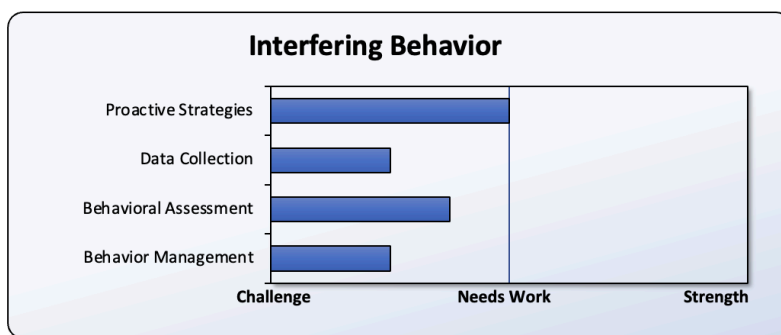
Independence is often listed as a challenge for individuals on the autism spectrum, especially as they age and expectations for independence increase into adulthood. Limitations in independent functioning have implications across all settings and throughout life. Building independence begins with our youngest students learning routines. Students should be encouraged and supported in all classroom settings to engage in more independent activities throughout the school day. Goals targeting independence should be included in all students' IEPs.

Students should be encouraged and supported to engage in more independent activities. Structured work systems are one evidence-based practice that supports student

independence. Choice-making activities should also be included as a routine part of the learners' day. Most tasks observed were adult-directed.

Interfering Behavior

The Interfering Behavior domain documents proactive strategies and approaches to support behavior within the learning environment that are consistently implemented by all staff to address both interfering and adaptive behavior. The area also focuses on behavioral assessment, including the functional behavior assessment process and, in turn, the development of behavior intervention plans to decrease the problematic behavior and increase a replacement behavior. Data collection systems are reviewed to measure student behavior and progress toward IEP goals.

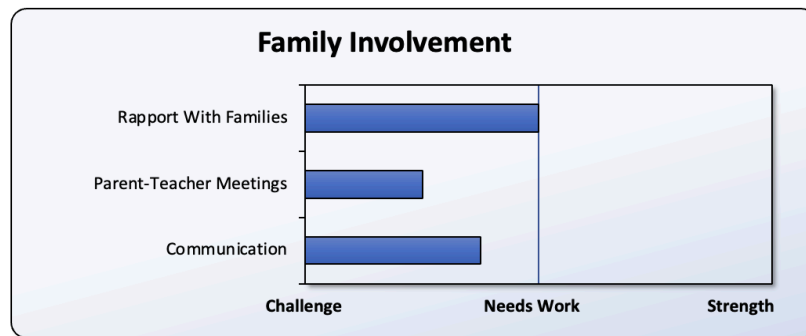


The review of student IEPs found that the functions of the replacement behaviors identified did not match the functions of the target behaviors identified to decrease. Research has shown that teaching students who exhibit interfering behavior a functional alternative or replacement behavior decreases the frequency of their engaging in interfering behaviors because an underlying need causing the student to engage in interfering behaviors is addressed. New skills that serve the same function should be targeted. Therefore, the replacement behavior's function must match the interfering behavior's function identified in the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). Some positive strategies were observed to support behavior, such as token boards, social stories, visual supports, and reinforcement systems; however, these systems were not used consistently. Behavioral data collection was limited to one classroom.

Family Involvement

The relationship that exists between the school and family, as well as family members' active involvement in the student's program, are key features of special education programs in general, and especially programs for students with autism. Such involvement is fostered by family members becoming a part of the interdisciplinary team that plans

the student's program, ongoing and routine communication with family members, and scheduled meetings between the student's teachers and family members.



Interviews with parents and school staff indicated that interactions between staff and families are positive yet limited and occur more often when the families initiate communication with school staff. Communication systems varied throughout the school, and was indicated through interviews that there was not an expectation to communicate with families consistently. Communication systems that were observed to be in place consisted of general information on the students' day (what subjects they participated in, how the students felt at school that day) and a small section for teachers to write more individualized notes. Mokena Elementary School staff should consider involving families in the types of communication they prefer and collaborate with families on what they want their home-school communication to contain.

Final Remarks

We appreciate the opportunity to allow our team to facilitate the APERS within your program. The information within this report highlights the strengths observed and areas to target for professional growth. As discussed in our debriefing session, we will meet again to discuss focus areas. We look forward to building capacity within Mokena Schools.