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# The School-Based Educational Therapist

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## ABSTRACT

*This article describes the now commonplace practice of San Francisco Bay Area independent schools hiring educational therapists (ETs) in non-special education school settings. According to a recent survey of learning specialists in 22 different schools representing five regions in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, 75% identify as being an educational therapist (ET). The reasons for initially hiring an ET are explored, as well as the evolution, dramatic expansion of roles, duties, integration and visibility over the past 20 years. These hiring practices are in alignment with the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) requirement that “member schools create and sustain diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all” (2012, NAIS). The history of hiring an ET is described by referencing the reasons a school chooses to employ their first ET. Lastly, there is an invitation to other ETs to state whether ETs in different geographical areas serve in this capacity and, if not, to consider integrating the role into independent schools within their area.*

*Note: In this article, any reference to a Learning Specialist (LS) is someone who is certified as an ET and is employed by a non-special education independent school. ET/LS is used in this article to signify their training and role.*

Special thanks to Sabina Aurilio, MEd, for her support in beginning this article.

## INTRODUCTION

A significant number of those trained as an ET work in independent schools in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. This phenomenon appears to be unique to the region. (In California, an ET must have a special education credential to be employed in a public school.) The author of this article was the first to be hired in an independent school as an ET and she remained in that position for the past 24 years. As such, she has taken a special interest in studying the role, its evolution, the increase in schools that employ ETs, and the way each school utilizes them. The role has become so common that a panel of ETs serving in independent schools has become a regular part of the *Roles of the ET/Clinical Practice* course in educational therapy at Holy Names University, Oakland, CA. The choice for an independent school to employ an ET is a fairly recent phenomenon, but one that has gained increasing traction over the past ten years.

In their marketing materials, many independent schools profess a commitment to meeting the needs of all learners, perhaps because having students with diverse learning styles has been recognized generally as a value in school communities. In fact, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) states, “We expect member schools to create and sustain diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all”

(National Association of Independent Schools, Policy Statement on Equity and Justice, “Principles of Good Practice”, adopted November 2012 [www.nais.org](http://www.nais.org)). However, there is scant literature specific to serving students with a learning difference, (LD) in independent schools. Within independent schools, those with specialized training who support students with LDs are often called a learning specialist (LS). For example, only ten articles were found referring to Learning Specialists; they spanned the time period from 1990-2012. Of those, only six were specific to the role and two of those described a position within non-public special education schools. However, Rothschild and Peduto (2004) signaled this role might become more commonplace.

*Upon reflection over the past 10 years, we've concluded that significant changes can indeed occur in an independent school. After recognizing the existence of specific needs of the student with a learning disability, collaborative efforts can bring about acceptance and awareness...systematically providing support for both LD students and their families is a vital component to ensure optimal adjustment and achievement. Parents, faculty, students and administrators working together, can effectively address the educational, psychological and social needs of the student with a learning disability. (p. 11)*

## METHOD

A research protocol was submitted and approved by the Holy Names University Institutional Review Board to distribute a Qualtrics survey (Qualtrics.com). The survey was launched in the fall of 2015 to collect data about the roles and responsibilities of independent school educational therapists in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

Sixty-nine individual surveys were sent out using school email addresses. Of that group, 58 (or 84%) were opened. Parochial schools did not allow direct email to either the staff or faculty, therefore, some surveys may not have been received. Seventy five percent of the respondents identified as being trained as an ET. Data was collected from this group only; others were thanked and exited from the survey. Some ETs worked in non-public schools exclusively serving students with learning disabilities, but they were not the focus of this article and their information was not collected in the Qualtrics survey data.

## RESULTS

The data is based on the 33 ET/LSs who completed the survey. The data were from twenty-two different schools representing five regions in the Bay Area; 50% were from the East Bay (Alameda and Contra Costa Counties); 27 % were from San Francisco; 13% responded from Marin County and 10% were from the Peninsula (San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties). The completed surveys showed some interesting statistics and trends. It was determined that San Francisco Bay Area schools have employed a learning specialist from as recently as one year to the two schools who have employed an ET/LS for more than 20 years. The majority of the schools have hired a school specialist relatively recently, i.e., in the past 6-10 years.

Many non-special education independent schools in the greater San Francisco Bay Area hire ETs. Within these schools, 63% of such hires are called Learning Specialists; 10% are called ETs, and the rest have a title associated with learning (e.g. Learning Support Services, Learning Services Coordinator, Director of Learning Service).

The ET/LS who takes on this job is charged with many responsibilities: nurturing the success of students with LDs, meeting teacher needs, training faculty, responding to parent concerns, participating in admissions, and lessening the need for administrators to serve as case managers for students with LDs. Many ETs, by virtue of their backgrounds and training, are well prepared to take on these duties.

During the past 6-10 years, the hiring of an ET/LS in the greater San Francisco Bay Area has increased in number; so have the number of their hours and the complexity of their duties. The range of tasks may be viewed as a reflection of each school's culture, priorities and resources. Interestingly, the role has evolved due to the interplay of each school's culture and each ET's training. Additionally, ETs in Bay Area independent schools have communicated regularly with each other through study groups and list serves. This regular communication has furthered the evolution of these positions and compounds the positive effects, because when ETs share service delivery models, resources, approaches to common problems, their experiences, and referrals to allied professionals, they further the quality and kinds of services they provide.

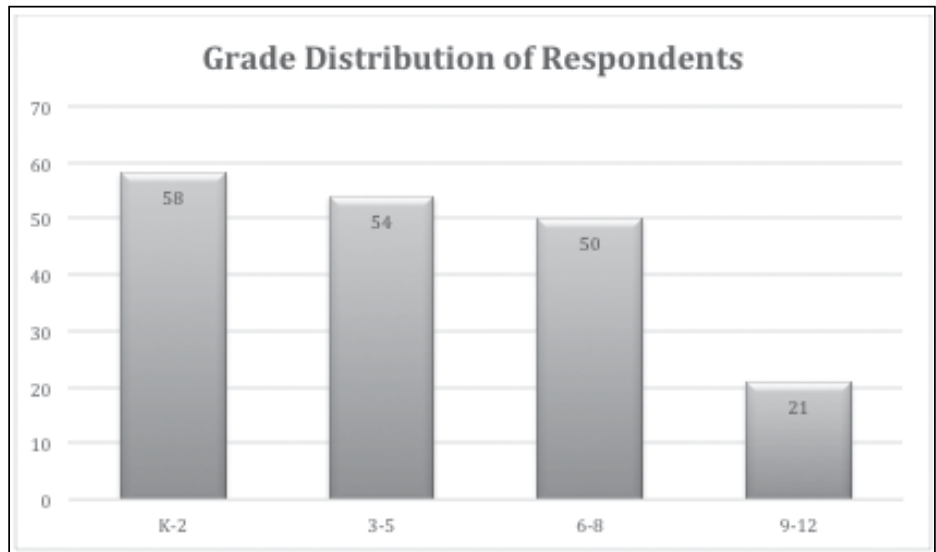
One ET/LS provided excellent examples of the benefits of this professional collaboration:

*We share and vet professional development opportunities for each other, recommending what's particularly good and helpful... then we share key things we learn with each other in the form of resources, articles on most recent research, new approaches and understandings related to learning differences and mental health. In this way, all of us can benefit from what any one of us undertakes or learns individually.*

*We share our experiences with other allied providers, both as referral resources for each other, and as a means to "fine tune" and "curate" our recommendations to families and schools, based on experiences and specifics of individual providers. This makes us better at guiding students and families to the most helpful and appropriate resources.*

*We consult with each other on a regular basis, on a wide variety of issues and challenges in our fields. Having these groups means*

TABLE 1 – Percentage of respondents who work at each grade band.



*we widen our network of colleagues (and the depth of knowledge and experiences that come with this) from the 'norm' of having one or two learning specialists in a school setting, to a much wider, collective body of knowledge to draw from. (Kristi Thompson, personal communication, June 3, 2016.)*

## TRAINING

The ET/LSs who are employed within independent schools are well educated. Eighty-three percent hold an Educational Therapist Certificate and 96% have a Master's Degree. Forty-six percent also hold a teaching credential and a few had Montessori certification. Twenty-nine percent have also earned a special education teaching credential and some hold a combination of these degrees and credentials. Others noted having advanced degrees in educational administration.

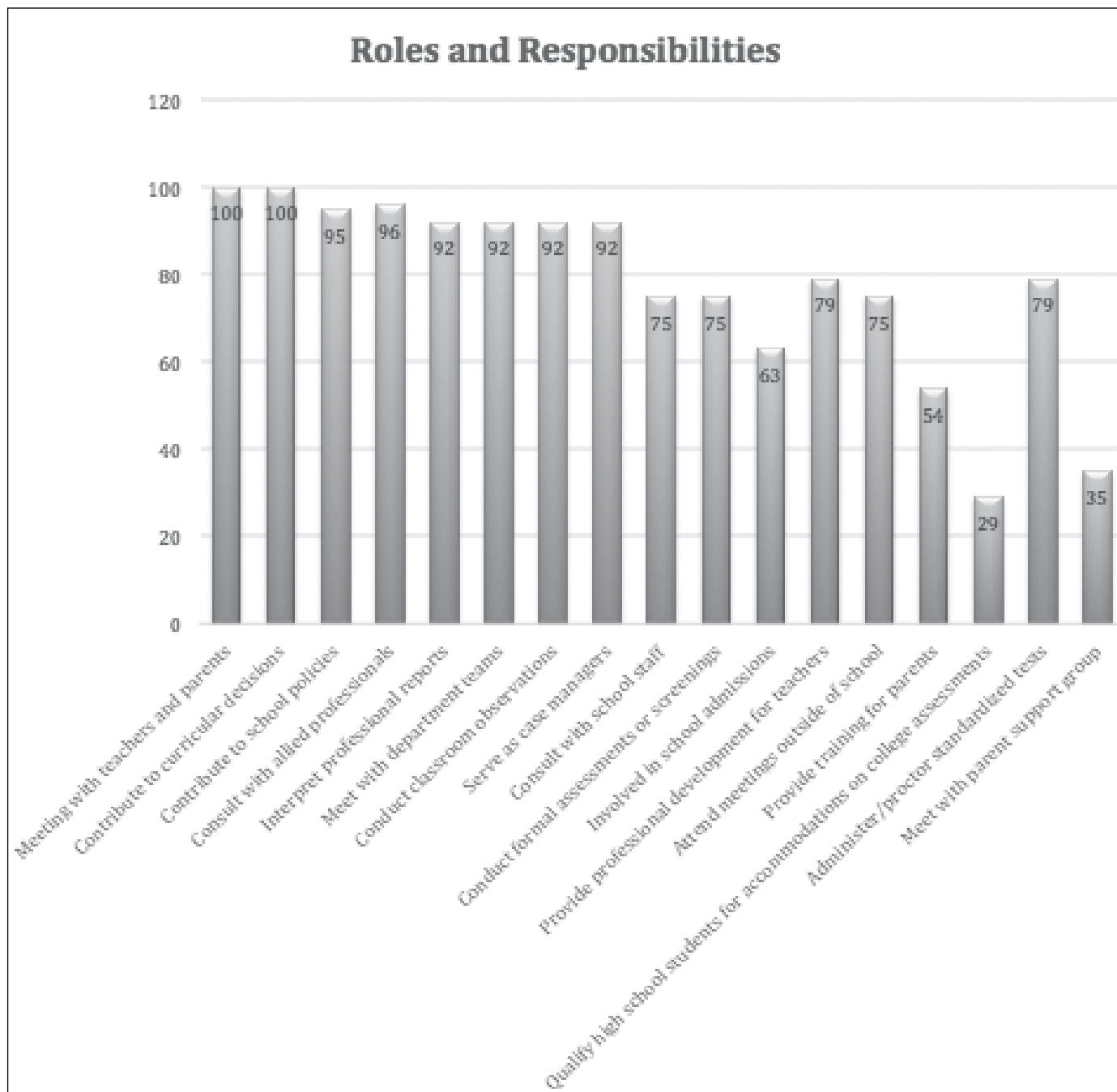
## GRADE LEVELS SERVED

Those surveyed support a variety of grade levels. Note: Some ET/LSs serve a single grade level, and some serve more than one grade level band. (See Table 1.)

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Respondents affirmed that their roles are well integrated into the school community, with 100% of them meeting regularly with school administrators. This seat at the table keeps the ET/LS and her or his perspective involved in school decisions and policies. All have worked on school curricular decisions. 95% answered that their input has directly informed school policies or has assisted in creating them. As evidenced by how they are used, these individuals are clearly seen as valuable voices in programmatic decisions, and the professional training and perspective of the ET is seen as an asset to the school.

TABLE 2 – Percentage of respondents fulfilling specific roles and responsibilities



There are additional roles that require skills in collaboration, organization, and the ability to manage one’s time (See Table 2). One hundred percent meet with teachers and parents. Nearly all (96%) consult with allied professionals and 92% synthesize and disseminate information from allied professionals’ reports. Ninety two percent meet with grade-level or department teams and conduct classroom observations. Most (92%) serve as case managers and 75% consult with other members of the school’s staff. Seventy-five percent conduct formal assessments or informal screenings for the school. Many (63%) are involved in school

admissions and most (79%) provide professional development for teachers. Seventy-nine percent administer or proctor standardized tests. Seventy-five percent attend meetings outside of their school, such as IEP meetings. More than half provide training for the parents (54%). At the high school level, some (29%) qualify students for accommodations on college assessments. Thirty-five percent meet with the parent support group. Table 3 details their roles in training others. Table 4 details the types of assessments performed by the ET/LS respondents.

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## VISIBILITY

The presence of ETs in schools is much more visible than it was ten years ago. In the past, some ET/LSs had reported that their contact information was not readily available and their offices were often “tucked away” (personal communication regarding internal survey conducted by Kristen Hawkinson, MEd, ET/P, of the East Bay AET study group). Now, 83% responded that their contact information is available on their school’s website and 96% are listed in the school directory within academic department rosters or under categories such as student support services. Eighty-three percent responded affirmatively that LS services are described on the school’s website. Offices for learning specialists are now easily accessed. Ninety-two percent stated that their office is centrally located within the school campus (See Table 5). These are indicators of schools’ growing acceptance and value of this position and the fading stigma previously associated with this role.

## BENEFITS THE WHOLE SCHOOL

Serving as an ET/LS benefits the whole school community and not just those on their caseload. The presence of the ET/LS directly supports administrators and classroom teachers. Already named in this article are their roles in admissions, faculty development, parent training, and service on curricular committees. Other examples include grade-level teaching and/or developing curriculums for specific grades. Those in the study were able to give another 21 examples of how their work benefits the larger school community well beyond supporting students in their caseload. One ET/LS said, “I teach three classes and supervise a homeroom.” Another stated, “I developed a Learning Lab that serves all students.” An ET/LS noted, “I teach a one month unit to all seventh and eighth graders in their Life Skills Class on learning and brain diversity.” Another ET/LS wrote, “I do reading assessments and small group instruction, often taking the stronger students and letting the teacher support the students with more challenges.” One ET/LS said, “I teach a Study Skills class to the entire fifth grade. Last year, I taught an essay test-taking strategy class to the entire seventh grade and I’m currently teaching a knitting elective offered to the seventh and eighth graders.”

TABLE 3 – Percentage of respondents involved in training others.

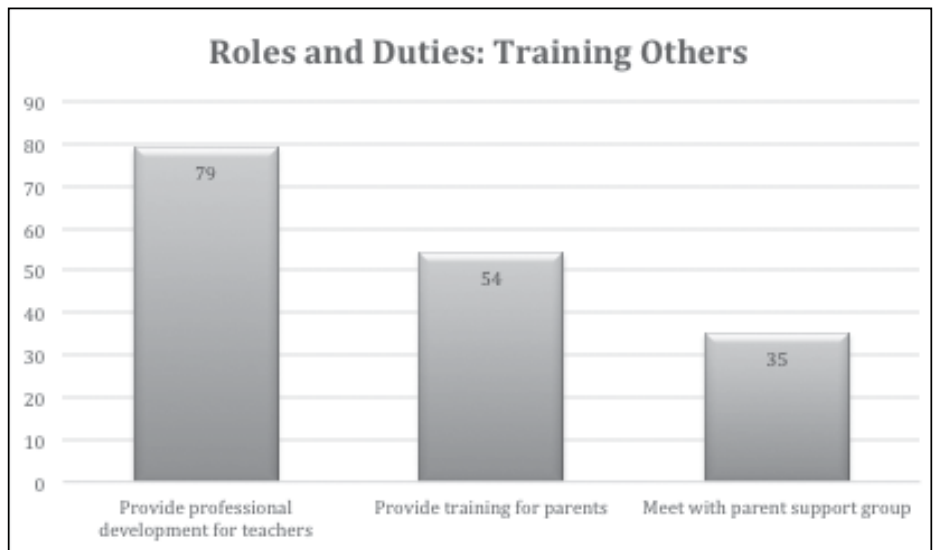
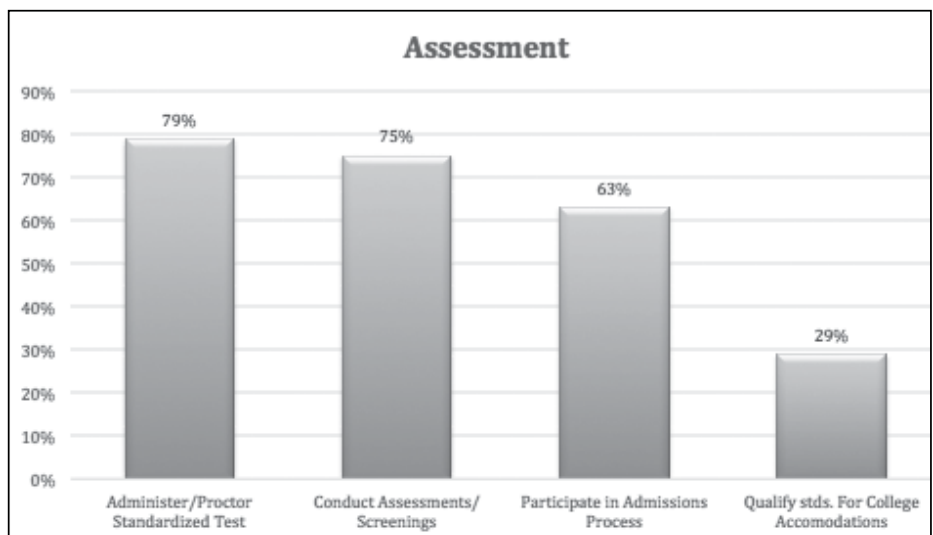


TABLE 4 – Percentage of respondents performing specific assessment duties.



## CHALLENGES

When asked what aspect(s) of their job was most challenging, most respondents found the breadth of tasks difficult to reconcile within their hours, while attempting to meet all of the school’s needs. Fifty-nine percent said they were “spread too thin” or expressed similar difficulties. Others cited, “managing the workload”, “balancing multiple roles”, “prioritizing tasks within the limits of part-time hours” as well as “lack of time/resources to provide needed services and support.” One ET added, “Juggling multiple jobs at different schools with a large caseload, many families, many simultaneous demands [makes it] hard to feel that I’m doing a complete job anywhere.” Another said, it is difficult to “handle all the roles I play and meet the needs of every student referred to me throughout the year.”

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Some ET/LS struggled to provide direct service, schedule all the necessary meetings and help teachers or parents understand accommodation or the reasons behind support. “*Helping teachers shift their thinking and planning from the more familiar to the more flexible and/or inclusive approaches...*” and “*working to support the increasing numbers of LD in the school...getting the teachers to look at differentiated learning/curriculum design in order to support all students*” were additional challenges. Also, “*demystifying the evaluation and support process for parents to get them on board,*” and “*working with parents around College Board applications*” were concerns. In summary, it was clear that, with the increased roles of ETs in these schools, came a greater demand on their limited time. To that end, they may need to advocate for the delineation of their duties to keep from being overwhelmed.

### WHAT IS WORKING WELL?

When asked what enables them to do their job effectively, 49% specifically named support from administration. One respondent said the “*support of an administrator who values my insights and experience, who regularly states the value of having an ET as a part of the faculty [is important].*”

ET/LSs often cited collaboration with supportive colleagues and other team members as important. “*Frequent and clear communication*” was an example. Another ET noted, “*working closely with the Student Success Team made up of the administration, counselor and referring teacher. This structured approach to problem-solving and developing individual action plans is a tremendous benefit in meeting the needs of students, parents and the teachers we work with every day.*” Another ET/LS commented on the school’s “*collaborative ethos*” and “*its strong desire to serve our kids well and be clear about our own limitations.*” Another ET/LS ranked the school’s “*overall commitment to diversity and growth mindset*” as being very helpful to performing this work well. Others indicated their own “*ongoing training*” and “*ongoing professional development*” helped them be effective, while another ET/LS echoed that the “*opportunities for community collaboration and professional development with other peers*” was productive. A different person emphasized the respect the administration demonstrated by allowing her/him to “*structure my program as I see best.*” Table 6 illustrates the percentage of ET/LS who perform duties requiring collaboration.

### AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

What prompts a school to hire their first ET as a learning specialist? Historically, the decision to hire follows a familiar course despite differences in school philosophies and staffing. Most ETs are initially hired as an independent contractor with a limited number of hours to fulfill a perceived need - often to work with a specific teacher or grade level due to an unprecedented number of students with LDs or to offer teachers information and strategies about specific learning disabilities they might be encountering in their classroom. Some are hired to create a “*learning profile,*” which summarizes each identified student’s diagnosis, strengths, needs, and recommendations for the teachers and school. This profile is designed to provide

a quick reference guide for teachers and staff to understand an individual student’s primary strengths, challenges, and diagnoses. Others have been employed to deliver a series of professional development for the faculty about teaching to LDs, ADHD, executive functioning deficits, or whatever is the “*hot topic*” of the season. The needs for hiring an ET influence the roles and duties of that initial position.

Usually, the outcome of hiring an ET is very positive. Generally, the faculty feels supported in ways they have not before. Secondly, the administration realizes that a highly qualified ET eases their workload considerably by becoming the “*point person*” for parents, by case managing specific students’ needs, and in supporting teachers. Thirdly, parents report feeling more confident that their student’s needs are being met. The mere presence of an ET may be seen as an indicator of the school’s overall engaged approach towards students with LDs. As a result, any one of these stakeholder groups may advocate for adding more hours or regularizing the ET position. This echoes Burka and Meade’s (2000) view of the emerging role in their school.

*Within the school, the primary advocate for students with learning differences has been the learning specialist. This individual has played a number of supportive roles, such as providing academic therapy, explaining students’ learning styles to teachers and making recommendations for classroom and curriculum modifications, and communicating with parents (p. 96).*

The next stage is hiring the ET as a part-time employee. This enables all parties to develop a relationship and gives the ET opportunities to observe the workings of the school on a regular basis. More frequent contacts with the faculty, students, parents and administration allow the ET to develop an understanding of the school culture and expectations for student performance. Often, staff members find that many learning strategies indicated for students with LDs may actually strengthen skills for the rest of the students in their class.

Once the ET is hired, duties usually increase. Now, the ET takes on roles in admissions, case management, making referrals to allied professionals for assessments or service as well as interpreting allied professionals’ reports to staff and parents. Further, they perform classroom observations, and provide direct intervention services to students. Some ETs also conduct limited in-house assessments for students who have not been assessed previously.

All of these duties require excellent communication skills, organizational skills, and the ability to self-monitor one’s work. Additionally, a keen sense of developmental markers, knowledge of a wide range of specialized curriculums and intervention strategies, and strengths in assessment using formal and informal assessments are also needed. Many ETs serve as guides and an on-going resource for parents beginning the journey of understanding their child’s specific learning difference. Nearly all interpret assessment reports from allied professionals (speech and language pathologists, audiologists, optometrists, occupational therapists, developmental pediatricians, educational psychologists, and neuropsychologists) for parents, teachers and staff. This ability to understand and accurately

explain professional reports enables school personnel to better grasp the student's strengths and needs, as well as plan effective interventions and identify and implement appropriate accommodations. Parents and the school team can define their roles, align expectations, determine the types of support possible at school and define the frequency and modes of communication.

In the San Francisco Bay area, rarely do part-time positions become full-time positions. In current economic times, a second part-time person may be added rather than increase the hours of the current position, so that paying benefits is not required. Some schools opt for learning specialists at different grade levels. This additional person usually has a background and experience in supporting students within another age span. This expands the expertise across grade levels or divisions.

If an ET has been hired as a full-time faculty member that position will likely be rehired as full-time if that person leaves because the duties and expectations for the role have increased to full-time. Twenty-five years ago there were no ETs in independent schools in the San Francisco Bay area. Now, nearly every independent school in the greater San Francisco Bay area has at least one. There is no longer stigma for having an ET on staff. Instead, teachers have come to expect this type of support, parents check school websites before enrolling to ascertain the types of support offered, and administrators rely on ETs to be the point-person and case-managers for students of concern. Currently, nearly every independent school in the greater San Francisco Bay Area has a part-time ET or other learning specialist, regardless of the school's size.

Having an ET on staff supports the school. The modifications recommended for a few specific students may actually strengthen skills for others. Referrals to allied professionals are appropriate. Assessments yield useful information that can apply to that specific school. Teachers have a ready resource for their questions, and observations that take place in the more natural

TABLE 5 – Percentage of respondents reporting extent of visibility.

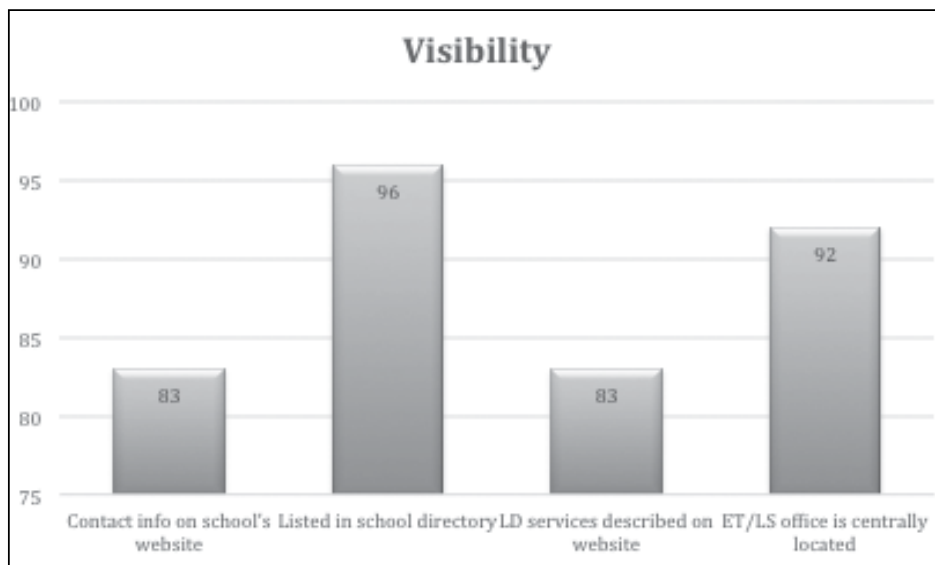
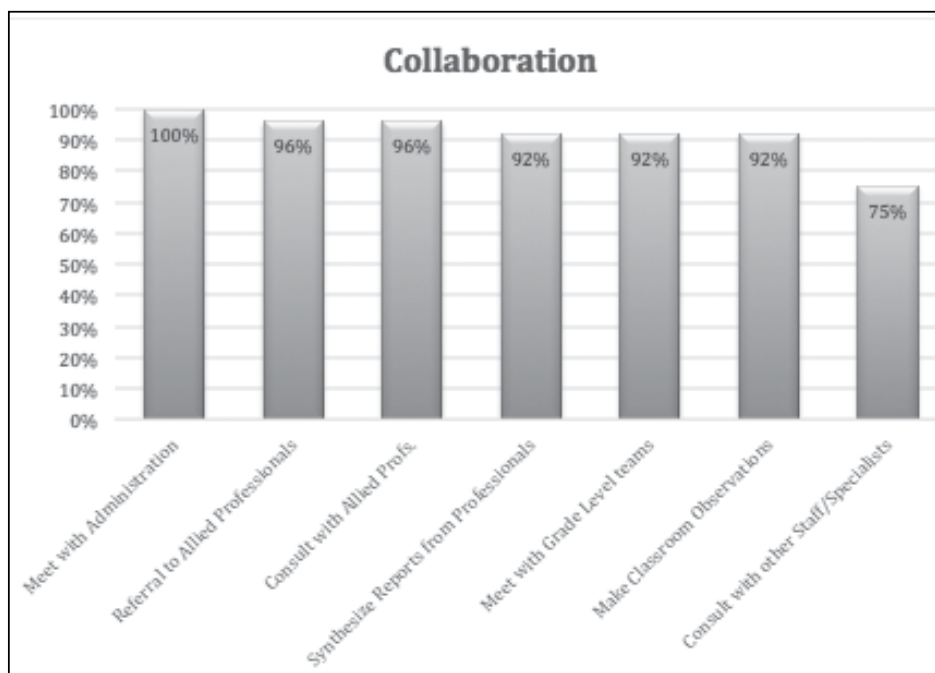


TABLE 6 – Percentage of respondents involved in various aspects of collaboration.



setting of the classroom are less obtrusive and more accurately reflect the school's culture and expectations for learning and behavior. Having an ET on staff improves retention of students, which increases the economic health of a school. The school-based ET can bring the lens of cognitive and psychological diversity to curricular and programmatic planning for the whole school community. Interestingly, the ET often remains in the school for a long time - often having a longer history with the school than the current administrators.

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## SUMMARY

Serving in an independent school is a viable role for many ETs in the greater Bay Area. Some work in this capacity only, combining their ET training and teaching credentials to perform this work. Many work part-time in a school setting and also have a private practice. Seventy five percent of the respondents in the survey identified as being an ET. This affirms the fact that, in the San Francisco Bay Area, ETs are frequently employed in independent schools.

***“Serving as an ET/LS [in an independent school] benefits the whole school community and not just those on their caseload. [It] directly supports administration and classroom teachers.”***

The number of ETs serving in San Francisco Bay Area schools has steadily increased in the past 24 years. In a 2015 Qualtrics survey of ETs serving in 20 non-special education independent schools, 100% meet with administrators and cited this as a contributor to working effectively in that role. The ability to plan, prioritize, and self-monitor time allocation was deemed critical. Collaboration and consultation skills are essential since between 95% - 100% of ETs serving in schools reported performing the follow activities: meeting with teachers, meeting with parents, meeting with grade-level or department teams, serving as case managers, making referrals to outside professionals, and consulting with allied professionals. Offices are no longer “tucked away” but are easily accessible. A high percentage (96%) have their contact information listed on the school’s directory. ET/LS services are described on the school’s website and all feel their work benefits the school, as a whole. Now, the role has evolved from a very limited function to the point that 100% have contributed to their school’s curricular decisions and 95% have informed school policies.

When asked what they desired as an outcome from completing the survey, responders specifically said they wished to inform AET about this role. They lamented that AET seems to only recognize one to one work and either doesn’t know about or disregards this potential role for ETs. If the NAIS policy on Equity and Justice requires member schools “to create and sustain diverse, inclusive, equitable, and just communities that are safe and welcoming for all”, perhaps increasing the number of independent schools who employ ETs throughout the nation is one way to meet the NAIS expectation, increase awareness of ETs in the general public and create a rigorous community of

ETs networking regularly. The author and other Bay Area ETs wonder how many ETs in different geographical areas serve in this capacity and invite comments/data from ETs elsewhere. If you would like to receive an Executive Summary of the survey, or have comments you can email the author, Marion Marshall, at: marshall@hnu.edu.

Hopefully, by sharing the evolution of how independent schools employ ETs in the San Francisco Bay Area others may explore this possibility for their geographical area. Note that becoming a full time or part time ET in an independent school has been a process of evolution. What began with only one or two schools employing an ET twenty years ago is now commonplace throughout the greater San Francisco Bay Area. The job of being employed as an ET embedded in an independent school, offers a rewarding career path, with the possibility of helping to create schools that are truly diverse, inclusive, and welcoming to all.

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## ADDENDUM

### *Survey Questions*

This survey will be used as data about educational therapists serving as learning specialists in independent schools. The survey is designed to gain aggregate information about the training, roles, and responsibilities of educational therapists who are employed by Bay Area independent schools. Responses will not be traced back to an individual nor to a specific school. Thank you for considering participating.

Participation in the survey is voluntary. You may end your participation at any time.

Do you understand the purpose and agree to take the survey?  
Yes    No    (If no, exited the survey.)

Are you an educational therapist (ET) in the greater Bay Area?  
(If NO, exited the survey.)

Do you work in a non-special education independent school?  
(If NO exited the survey.)

What is your professional training? (Check all that apply)

Are you a current member of AET?

What grade level(s) do you serve?

What is your title?

Your contract is: full time; half time; less than half time

How many years have you been employed as an ET/LS in a school?

How many years have you served as an ET/LS in your current school?

How many years has your current school had Learning Specialist type support services?

Are you listed in the school faculty directory?

Is your direct contact information on the school's website?

Does the school have learning support services stated in its mission statement?

Are LS support services described on the schools website?

Do you...

- Meet regularly with other members of the LS team?
- Meet regularly with a school administrator?
- Meet regularly with allied professionals employed by the school?
- Serve as a member of the school's parent support group?

Consider any additional roles you perform. Check all that apply.

Your duties include.... Check all that apply. (17 duties listed.)

Has your role informed/created school policies? If yes, describe.

Has your role informed curricular decisions? If yes, describe.

Where is your office?

- In a central location
- Not in a central location but easily accessible
- Tucked away

What aspect(s) of your role do you find most challenging?

What helps you perform your role effectively?

What do you hope to gain from taking the survey?

*Marion Marshall, MS, BCET, FAET, is a multiple award-winning educator who has taught in public and independent schools. She is a sought-after presenter for regional, statewide and national conferences. Marion is the Director of the graduate-level Educational Therapy Program at Holy Names University in Oakland, California. She teaches within the program and is the lead advisor for many Master's theses. She is the faculty member of HNU's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. Marion was the Clinical Director of the Raskob Learning Institute, also located on the Holy Names University campus. Her current interests are linking assessment to remediation, collaborating with allied professionals across disciplines, and mentoring those who are new to the dynamic field of educational therapy*

