



An Evaluation of Learn It Systems: Desert Choice Schools

2014-2015 Evaluation Report

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### **The Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education**

The Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) is a research center within the Johns Hopkins University School of Education. Established in 2004, the center's major goal is to improve the quality of education for children in grades pre-K to 12 through high-quality research and evaluation studies, and the dissemination of evidence-based research. CRRE is a multi-faceted organization, offering client-driven research and evaluation services, while also publishing a website, magazine, newsletter, and blog dedicated to providing stakeholders with rigorous evidence of effective educational practices.

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## Executive Summary

This research investigated the impact on qualitative outcomes of a special education program for students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities. Specifically, this project involved conducting a case study evaluation of the Desert Choice Schools Program in Buckeye, Arizona. The Desert Choice Schools Program (DCS) serves as a private day school setting for students from multiple public school districts in the area surrounding Buckeye, Arizona and provides a full-time instructional program for students with severe behavioral and emotional disabilities. Through incorporating distinct and intensive behavioral and academic interventions for students, the DCS program seeks to provide partnering districts with an effective and cost-efficient placement for this student population, which is often difficult for districts to serve effectively through traditionally available special education programs.

This case study evaluation focused on describing the DCS program's theoretical underpinnings, distinct pedagogical strategies, perceived impact within its partnering districts, and perceived effectiveness at improving a variety of student outcomes. The case study involved researchers from the Johns Hopkins University Center for Research and Reform in Education visiting the DCS program located in Buckeye, Arizona during November 2014. This program serves roughly 60 students from grades K-12 from the Buckeye Union Elementary and High School Districts (BUSD), which themselves serve roughly 15,000 students combined. In evaluating this program, researchers conducted classroom walk-throughs and conducted numerous interviews with students, parents, teachers, and administrators from the DCS program, as well as interviews with district leaders from BUSD and one other neighboring district.

Results from the presented research demonstrated notable support for the DCS program across a variety of areas. Classroom walkthroughs, as well as interviews with DCS administrators and staff, demonstrated a perceived strong degree of fidelity to the DCS mission, program related practices, and teaching strategies. A high degree of buy-in and enthusiasm for the program's vision and methods was also exhibited consistently by both DCS teachers and administrators. Interviews with district level leaders demonstrated a strong degree of satisfaction from the district perspective concerning the DCS program's role in serving special education students. District leaders made specific note of the increased programmatic and financial efficiency the program has brought to their districts and also noted the program's perceived effectiveness at enhancing academic and behavioral outcomes in the students sent to DCS. Lastly, interviews with DCS parents and students demonstrated the program's perceived positive impact on improving psychological, social, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students.

Although strong positive consensus existed among each of the participant groups concerning the DCS program's efficacy, suggestions for possible refinement included expanding the enrichment and extracurricular options available to students, continually refining the DCS academic programming as the program expands to encompass students with more diverse disabilities, and maintaining fidelity to the DCS model as the program grows and expands.

Overall, the results gathered from this case study evaluation demonstrated notable qualitative support for the DCS program in improving outcomes for special needs students within the BUSD as perceived from a variety of important viewpoints. The high level of consensus exhibited by each of the project's participant groups (district leaders, DCS administrators and teachers, DCS parents and students) concerning the program's efficacy and benefits suggest notable support and satisfaction with the program. Moving forward, additional research investigating the program's influence on quantitative measures pertaining to academic and behavioral outcomes could be used to further expand upon these findings.

### **Introduction**

The present evaluation report summarizes the findings of a case study evaluation of the Desert Choice Schools Program in Buckeye, Arizona. This program, which serves as a private day school setting for students from the Buckeye Union Elementary and High School Districts (BUSD) and surrounding districts, is designed to provide regimented and systematic behavioral and academic instruction to students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties. The Center for Research and Reform in Education (CRRE) from Johns Hopkins University conducted a case study evaluation of the Desert Choice Schools Program (DCS) to gain insight into the program's theoretical underpinnings, pedagogical strategies, and perceived effectiveness at serving the special education service needs of students in the district. Specifically, the evaluation involved two members of the CRRE research team visiting the Desert Choice Schools program housed at the Buckeye Learning Center in BUSD for three days in November, 2014. During the visit, the research team conducted multiple classroom walk-throughs with DCS staff to learn about the program and its specific strategies and procedures. The team also conducted numerous interviews with BUSD district leaders, as well as DCS administrators, teachers, parents, and students to gain insight into the perceived effectiveness of the program. The present report summarizes the analysis and findings of these activities and draws conclusions on the perceived impact and potential of the DCS program.

### **Desert Choice Schools Overview**

The mission of Desert Choice Schools is teaching students academic and behavioral problem-solving strategies utilizing a highly structured, school-wide Positive Behavioral Supports program. The foundation of the DCS program is based on providing students with a healthy and safe learning environment that enables them to practice and learn appropriate academic survival skills, as well as strategies for making better choices by systematically teaching and reinforcing positive replacement behaviors. A cognitive restructuring approach is utilized to assist students in identifying the presenting problem and choosing an action plan based upon a systematic problem-solving method. All DCS teachers and support personnel are trained in the use of this methodology to assist students in maintaining positive choice-making. Ultimately, the desired outcome of the DCS program is to assist students in developing positive self-esteem in a structured learning environment where students are provided daily opportunities to practice

problem-solving skills and experience the benefits of making healthy choices that improve and enhance the quality of their lives.

To this end, the DCS program is based on the fundamental premise that everyone is responsible for his/her own behavior. The fundamental framework of the DCS program is the consistent use of common language with common rules and expectations throughout all DCS classroom settings. All teachers and support personnel are trained to incorporate and administer the same specific level system in every DCS classroom. The DCS level system employs a very specific rate of reinforcement to facilitate positive behavioral changes. The level system allows for the tracking of student progress, and the consistency of the level system provides students predictability in their environment. Students learn to respond to the rules in an expected manner with a predictable outcome. Students learn that one warning is all that is given before specific consequences are applied. This predictable response pattern is implemented and maintained with fidelity by all DCS teachers and support personnel.

### **Study Design**

A qualitative case study design was used in order to generate understanding of the specific benefits and impacts of the program. In BUSD, the DCS program is housed as a "school-within a school" at the Buckeye Learning Center (the district's campus for alternative programs) and is representative of the DCS partnership model that is followed in several districts in Arizona. As part of this evaluation, researchers from CRRE interviewed DCS administrators and district representatives overseeing the partnership, conducted focus groups with DCS teachers, conducted interviews with DCS students and parents, and conducted two separate walk-through style observations of the school to gain insight into the specific strategies DCS employs throughout the day. This report reflects analysis of the data collected through these activities. All interview and focus group scripts are presented in the Appendix section. Data collection protocols were created by CRRE after consulting with representatives from Learn It systems. Protocols were designed to thoroughly assess participants' perceptions of the DCS program's effectiveness at producing targeted academic and behavioral outcomes and achieving DCS program goals. The findings of this report are limited by the collection of qualitative and perception-based data from site visits, interviews, and focus groups. Additional statistical analysis of student achievement compared to a control group was not performed.

### **Evaluation Questions**

Listed below are the specific evaluation questions for the present study, as a result of several discussions between the evaluation team and Learn It Systems:

1. What are typical practices and fidelity of program implementation in Desert Choice Schools?

2. To what degree do teachers and support staff perceive the program and its strategies to be effective in supporting its defined goals and benefiting the school district?
3. To what degree does the program appear to positively impact student behavior and academic achievement?
4. What are the areas of relative program strengths and weaknesses?

## **Participants**

Participants in the study were designated by Learn It Systems Desert Choice Schools, and included key stakeholders and staff involved with the DCS program in Buckeye. All three administrators from the school were interviewed, and all seven teachers from the school participated in focus groups. Interviews were conducted with three key stakeholders from the BUSD superintendent's office (the superintendent, the director of special education, and the director of finance). A separate director of special education from a neighboring district also participating in DCS was interviewed as well. Lastly, a sample of seven students and five parents were interviewed. These participants were also identified by Learn It Systems Desert Choice Schools. Parent and student participants were selected based on their availability to complete the interviews and on the basis of creating a sample that evenly incorporated parents and students from the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

## **Research Setting**

The case study of the DCS program occurred at the BUSD Buckeye Learning Center (the facility houses DCS, as well as several other BUSD alternative learning programs). Located approximately 35 miles west of Phoenix (Arizona's largest city), the BUSD district serves just under 15,000 total students between grades K-12, nearly 250 of which are serviced at the Buckeye Learning Center. The DCS program has its own separate wing of this center and services just under 60 students in grades K-12.

## **Measures**

The primary data sources included interviews with key participant groups, as described below. Copies of the interview scripts for each group are included in the Appendix.

**District leader interview.** Interviews were conducted with district leaders overseeing partnerships with DCS. An interview script containing nine questions was used in order to gain structured feedback on the program from the district leaders' viewpoint. As needed, the CRRE research team also used follow-up questions to gain clarity on participant responses and explore district leader attitudes through conversation.



District leaders from both BUSD and the Dysart Unified School District (DUSD) participated in the interviews. Three district leaders from BUSD (the district overseeing the specific DCS school used as a case study in the presented report) were interviewed including the district's superintendent, finance director, and special education director. Additionally, the special education director from a neighboring district (DUSD), whose district has its own DCS campus, was also interviewed.

**Principal interview.** Interviews were conducted with administrators overseeing the DCS program. An interview script containing nine questions was used to gain structured feedback on the program from the administrators' viewpoint. As needed, the CRRE research team also used follow-up questions to gain clarity on participant responses and explore administrator attitudes through discussion.

Three administrators from the DCS program participated in interviews. These administrators included the head principal overseeing the Buckeye Learning Center (which includes the DCS program and several BUSD programs), the lead administrator for DCS, and one of the founders of DCS.

**Teacher focus group.** Two focus groups were held with teachers from DCS: one for elementary grades teachers and one for secondary grades teachers. All of the DCS teachers (seven total) participated in the focus group activities. A focus group script containing 11 questions was used to help gain structured feedback on the program from the teachers' viewpoint. As needed, the CRRE research team also used follow-up questions to gain clarity on participant responses and explore teachers' attitudes through conversation.

**Parent interview.** Five parents were selected by DCS to participate in an interview activity. An interview script containing 12 questions was used to gain structured feedback on the program from the parents' viewpoint. As needed, the CRRE research team also used follow-up questions to gain clarity on participant responses and explore parent attitudes toward the program conversationally.

**Student interview/focus group.** A total of seven students, representing the elementary, middle, and high school grade levels were selected by DCS and interviewed during the visit. An interview script containing 10 questions was used to help gain feedback on the program from the students' viewpoint. As needed, the CRRE research team also used follow-up questions to gain clarity on participant responses and explore student attitudes through conversation. To facilitate more conversational responses from students, most students were interviewed in pairs.

## Analysis

For each of the measures described, qualitative analysis was conducted to identify trends among participants' responses. Specifically, participant responses were categorized into main themes that corresponded with each of the evaluation questions. They were then totaled for each of the interview/focus group questions and disaggregated by participant groups. Participant responses

that reflected divergent opinions from the overall group consensus were analyzed in relation to the participants' other responses in order to gain clarity and context. The following sections summarize the findings drawn from these analyses. Where applicable, direct participant quotes are provided in order to illuminate the context of participant responses and provide greater clarity to participant attitudes and opinions.

## Results

During the visit, the CRRE research team toured the facility and visited DCS classrooms on two occasions with DCS administrators. These walk-through style observations were used to gain firsthand understanding of the program's structure and procedures. Based on these walk-throughs and information shared by the DCS administrators, information was gained concerning the distinct facets and components of DCS. These key components include:

- *Fixed student/teacher ratio* - DCS allows a maximum of 12 students in each class (all of the observed classes had fewer than 12 students). Furthermore, each class has one teacher and two behavioral technicians. Behavioral technicians serve as the lead facilitators of the school rules and behavioral expectations and provide ongoing support to teachers in a variety of ways (including working instructionally with small groups of students and handling crisis intervention).
- *Classroom level system* - Each period, students earn behavior points for exhibiting positive behavior, following school rules, and completing schoolwork. Behavioral points are totaled each day and dictate the behavioral level students are on. This level determines the degree of school-based privileges individual students are afforded including whether they are allowed to sit with other students, attend recess sessions, and talk with other students. Students are able to move up behavioral levels by earning a certain number of behavioral points and meeting behavioral goals for a set number of consecutive days. The points students earn each day are recorded on a daily progress report that is sent home to students' parents.
- *School-wide token economy* - For exhibiting positive behavior, students are awarded a form of school currency that can be exchanged for certain school-based privileges and items in the DCS school store.
- *One positive interaction per minute* - Teachers and behavioral technicians are instructed to provide one positive interaction for each student every minute of the day.
- *Student cubicles and areas for group seating* - Each classroom has 12 individual cubicle style desks for students that border the classroom walls (these desks have dividing walls so that students cannot easily interact with each other). In the center of each classroom, small tables are used for students sitting in groups. Whether students are required to sit individually in cubicles or allowed to sit with other students in groups is a function of their behavioral level.

- *Active involvement of all staff* - All staff present in each room (the teacher, the behavioral technicians, and any school psychologists, therapists, etc.) are expected by DCS to be actively involved in the instruction of students. As articulated by multiple DCS administrators, the instructional procedures of the program are designed so that it is not clear to an observer which individual in the classroom is the teacher.
- *School-wide problem solving steps* - Specific problem solving steps revolving around a "stop and think" model are posted in each class and referred to frequently by DCS staff.
- *School-wide rules* - A uniform set of school-wide rules are posted in each classroom. According to one DCS administrator, these rules are designed to be easy to understand for students and encompassing of all categories of misbehavior.
- *Detailed crisis intervention procedures* - DCS employs a specific set of procedures to prevent and address severe student misbehavior. Based on the Professional Crisis Management Association (PCMA) guidelines, these procedures are used in instances of severe student misbehavior to maintain student safety and classroom instructional order. All behavioral technicians are provided walkie-talkie devices to communicate throughout the building. The school also has video monitoring installed throughout the building and a series of composure rooms where students can be moved and supervised away from their classmates in instances of severe misconduct or emotional outburst.
- *Strategies and resources for specific student populations* - Instructional strategies targeted for students with emotional disabilities and autism are regularly scheduled. For instance, regular exercise breaks ("body breaks") are used with students throughout the school day and a sensory room containing a variety of games and tangible objects (balls, trampolines, etc.) is available for teachers to use with students with autism.

As articulated by multiple DCS administrators, the DCS program is specifically designed for replication with these key components intact across all DCS locations.

### **District Leader Interview Findings**

Interviews were conducted with district leaders and were used to gain insight into the partnership between DCS and the district from a central office perspective. Interviews were administered with four district leaders who were currently partnering their districts with the DCS program. These included the BUSD superintendent and lead financial officer, and two special education directors: one from BUSD and another from a neighboring district that also partners with DCS.

**Partnership overview.** District leaders from BUSD indicated that their partnership with DCS was now in its third year while the representative from DUSD indicated their partnership was now in its second year. District leaders were first asked to discuss the structure of their

district's partnership with DCS and how the partnership originated. In discussing the nature of the partnership, all four participants indicated that their district utilizes DCS in serving students from their district for whom they are not able to provide services on their public school campuses. Specifically, the participants discussed that they currently partner with DCS to service students with severe emotional disabilities and behavioral difficulties who previously were sent out of district to be taught.

All four of the district leaders interviewed stated that their districts were not effectively servicing this specific population of students (and the financial burden of servicing them out of district), and this led them to look for ways to improve this service delivery. Representatives from one district discussed how they initially considered further developing their in-district programs to serve this group of students but found that it would be highly inefficient to do so given the size of the district and the specialized training required for many of the teachers needed for this population. Specifically, one representative noted that it would be highly difficult to hire teachers (and behavioral technicians) with very specific qualifications to serve a very small number of students, then to not be able to find placements for these teachers after their students leave the school system or transfer to other districts. With this in mind, participants from this district indicated that they felt they needed to partner with an outside organization to provide the needed support.

All four participants noted that they were part of the search and interview committees that ultimately selected DCS. One respondent indicated that he/she had known one of the DCS founders for several years, while another indicated that after interviewing DCS, he/she discovered that they had many similar connections in the field. All four participants indicated that they were highly impressed with the expertise, overarching philosophies, and sincerity of DCS during the procurement process and that these facets ultimately led to their selection.

**Partnership benefits.** Participants then discussed what academic, programming, or financial benefits (if any) the partnership brings their district and its students. All four district leaders conveyed that the benefits are often substantial. One district leader said that because they now have a better option of where to send students with this type of special need (as opposed to serving them on their existing campuses), they are not only able to provide a better, more individualized option for these students, but can potentially improve substantially the performance of other students on their existing campuses. This participant explained that because they have an off-campus placement for students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties, the often highly disruptive nature of these students is no longer felt in their previous (regular) classrooms, thus improving outcomes for their classmates and creating a form of immeasurable "ripple effect". Other district leaders noted that they felt the program did very well in raising the bar for what could be expected out of this group of special needs students. District leaders also noted that they felt that DCS often does very well at developing effective teachers in house. In this area, one representative indicated that they felt that DCS would often take young, inexperienced, or average teachers and develop them into excellent teachers.

One participant did express feeling a degree of concern over the academic virtues of the program early in the partnership; however he/she also perceived this area as greatly improving. Another concern by this respondent was ownership of DCS shifting to Learn It Systems (located in Baltimore); specifically, that local control and DCS understanding of the educational landscape in Arizona could diminish over time. However, the respondent presently feels very good about the services provided by Learn It thus far.

*“Are there academic and programmatic benefits of having a partnership with DCS?”*

*“Absolutely. Their staff has specialized training that normal educators wouldn't have. They have expertise in this area. They take the emotion completely out of the equation; which is really good for these students and which is generally a volatile environment. They give choices to the students and students become aware of their own locus of control. When students come to us, they are typically students who blame everybody in the world, except themselves--their friends, their families, their teachers. Desert Choice helps them make good choices, by taking emotion out of the equation and understanding the consequences. DCS provides a common language, very clear expectations, and is very structured.”*

*“As an assistant principal for 15 years, one of my responsibilities was to sit in all the IEP's. It was frustrating to sit in all those meetings ... We had no other interventions and put them right back into the situations they weren't successful in. Now we have this tool in our toolbox. Now, we've put 'you over here and can show you how successful you are'. Not only does that kid feel successful, but that other 28 (kids in the class) also. It changes the whole dynamic. How far does that ripple go out before it stops? Just infinitely. If you take a couple of these kids off our campus, the cafeteria changes, the school dance changes, anxiety at the pep assembly. It is global and hits so many aspects; it's unbelievable. I don't know how you would measure this, that this kid affects every kid. Globally, for that education community, it hits so many.”*

*“Are there financial benefits of having a partnership with DCS?”*

In response, all four district leaders indicated that there are financial benefits pertaining to their district's partnership with DCS. Three spoke to the specific nature of these financial benefits, indicating that due to the cost and reimbursement structure of servicing special education students in Arizona, special education is often one of the most significant expenses for districts. Given the often especially extensive service needs of their students now placed at DCS (including therapy and psychiatry sessions, extensive special education service hours, transportation needs, etc.), participants indicated these expenses were often disproportionately large. As shared by one district leader:

*“I have a \$90,000 kid that I'm reimbursed \$24,000 for” and that with the previous program their district was “paying \$1.4 million for 26 kids and we had 0 reentry (the district was only reimbursed about \$475,000).”*

Another participant indicated that previously the district was spending in the mid \$40,000 range per student to have them receive services outside the district while only being reimbursed from the state in the “mid \$20,000 range.”

Participants indicated that due to the cost structure of DCS, they pay significantly less to outsource the services of this special needs population (i.e., roughly \$20,000 per student) and can actually net a profit from the special education reimbursement dollars they receive from the state. As indicated by one participant, this is a significant departure from their district previously needing to subsidize their special education budget with other funds. As stressed by this same individual, because they are pooling students from other districts to fill the DCS program, they do not have to worry about hiring or transferring teachers serving these students as the size of this student population shifts in their small district. In relation to this point, district leaders indicated that because the DCS facility is housed on their campus, they charge a small facilities fee to other districts that send students to DCS, yet the cost structure of the program is such that it is still highly cost effective for those neighboring districts sending students. Further specific comments pertaining to this question included:

*“We had a meeting this morning with our finance director and he said that last year all that program cost the district was \$200,000. That's HUGE. And we're looking at it costing us a million dollars three years prior...And we have better services.”*

*“Financially speaking it is the best way to go. For special ed. this is how you look to save money. They want to cut teachers, they want to cut positions; don't...Look into where your private placements are-that's where your money is.”*

*“From a financial standpoint, when we bring other school districts in, we don't charge for the school district services. They have an agreement with Desert Choice, and an agreement with us that we're providing the facility, so they have a facility charge from us. They set the prices up with Desert Choice...By the time they pay the facility fee, they are still in mid-twenties versus forty-five. This is a \$20,000 savings.”*

**DCS and other district programs.** District leaders next were asked to discuss the DCS program's impact on the district's special education programming, how the program compares with others in the district, and how the DCS policies for hiring staff compare with those of the district.

In relation to evaluation questions two and three, participants were first asked: "How does the partnership with DCS impact the district's approach to and success with serving special education students?" In response to this, three of the four participants indicated that they felt the DCS program was positively affecting their approach. Another participant (who oversees the district's finances) indicated they were not familiar enough with this portion of the partnership to respond. Three participants specifically discussed how the DCS program provides services for a specific portion of their special education population, an option the district could not really rely

on before the partnership, and how this has benefited their districts. They also noted how DCS staff have helped with trainings in the district and have expanded the services they provide to meet the needs of the district. Examples include providing a classroom for students with autistic spectrum disabilities, conducting professional development trainings for other teachers in the district, and helping develop programming for self-contained intervention classes housed in the district. Additional participant comments in this area included:

*“In the past we did everything to keep the student. Now we recognize if there's a child we can't handle, we have places to send them.”*

*“For that population, yes. For the emotionally disturbed population, yes. Any other populations, no. But for that population it has been huge.”*

Participants were next asked, "How does the DCS program compare to any of your other in-district programs?" And, "To what degree is DCS compatible with policies and standards for employing staff in the district?" All four participants indicated that they felt the program served a specific need for their district that other programs do not fill. The primary contribution is servicing students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties who cannot be effectively served in other district programs. However, participants generally did not feel that the program was easily comparable to any others they had in the district. Three district leaders did indicate that they found the accessibility and flexibility of the DCS program to be much better than previous programs. One participant noted they are able to call the DCS program to discuss servicing children with a variety of diverse needs regardless of whether or not they fit within the program's specific purview. As described by another participant:

*“I think they've offered and overlapped to help us with staff development. The fact that you can pick up the phone and call someone to talk about an issue. They're on top of it. They get right on it. So receptive and so quick. That part has been absolutely amazing to me.”*

Pertaining to the DCS program's hiring practices, participant responses varied. While multiple participants praised the quality of the administrators, teachers, and behavior technicians at DCS, only one participant indicated being familiar enough with their hiring practices to comment on them. This individual indicated that the standards for selecting and hiring staff at DCS match those of the district but that DCS special educators were on slightly higher salary ranges than their district counterparts (the participant also indicated though that they were not sure how the benefits structure compared).

Further in relation to this area, one participant praised the DCS program's ability to "grow their own" teachers, referring to strategies used by DCS to develop behavior technicians into certified teachers and offer professional development resources to help improve the overall practice of their teaching staff. Lastly, two participants noted that because of the private nature of DCS, they are able to remove ineffective teachers much more quickly than the district. Both further indicated that they felt this was a strength of the DCS program that complimented the district's

needs well (i.e., the DCS program is able to more quickly adapt their teaching force to changes in their student population than the district can).

**DCS support and addressing district needs.** In reference to evaluation question #4, district leaders discussed how supported they felt by DCS and how well they felt the DCS program met their district's needs. All four district leaders indicated that they felt very well supported by DCS. Participants shared examples of how they felt the program often would go to great lengths to help the district in a variety of ways (including brainstorming solutions for specific students and student groups and providing transportation resources for students to the DCS campus). Specific participant responses in this area included:

*“Very responsive. If I learn about a student we're worried about, then frequently I contact Pete and Travis and forward records. DCS will peruse them and let us know yes or no.”*

*“Oh yes! I can text (the DCS administrators) at midnight and I promise you they are both going to respond...At the end of the day you have to have those relationships. I have to be able to get an answer immediately and get an answer to my cabinet and my board. So that's really, really important.”*

All four participants further indicated that they were very pleased with the level of communication exhibited by DCS. Participant responses in this area included:

*“It's better than adequate, it's very good.”*

*“Another important thing too is to handle parents ...They are absolutely amazing with handling those situations so that I don't have to.”*

*“Learn It is very good to me. They're very understanding...I work with them on staffing; I work with them on other things and training. And they're very understanding of at the end of the day I have a program, I have more than Desert Choice Schools. So I have a program that I have to run and I have to put together. It's been amazing. They understand that local control.”*

In accordance with evaluation question #2, participants were asked: "To what degree do you feel that the needs of the district are adequately addressed/met by DCS staff and/or administration?" All four participants indicated that they felt that the DCS program met their district's needs very well. Specifically, they stressed the value of having a financially efficient option that was effective at improving outcomes for this population of students. Participants also praised the responsiveness and openness of the DCS staff in adapting to their districts' needs. Specific comments in this area included:

*“To what degree? 100%. Absolutely. What they are hired to do-they do and they do it well...I wish I could do ten more classrooms.”*



*“To a high degree. Again, we contract with another company, but on that side DCS has fulfilled all our needs. What I love about them is their flexibility. If we have a need out of the ordinary, they work with us to come up with a solution. We have several other districts so it's extremely rewarding to offer this.”*

*“It's been very, very fun for me to see what we've gone from, and to see where we are now three years later.”*

## **Principal Interview Findings**

Principal (administrator) interviews were conducted with three principals associated with the DCS program (the program's Director of Clinical Services, one of the program's founders, and the principal overseeing the Buckeye Learning Center). These interviews were conducted to gain information on the structure, philosophy, and organization of DCS, gain perspective on the administrators' roles in overseeing and providing leadership over the program, and to ascertain the program's benefits, strengths, and areas in need of refinement from the viewpoint of their positions.

**DCS overview and administrator involvement.** Administrators were first asked to discuss how they became involved with DCS, the structure and underlying pedagogical philosophies of DCS, and how their leadership skills may have evolved since they became involved with the program.

Two of the administrators interviewed helped found the DCS program and the remaining administrator indicated that he/she was part of the selection committee that interviewed and chose to partner BUSD with DCS. All three spoke about the beginnings of the program, citing the program's overarching purpose of helping children from its inception to the present; and also cited the personal and caring relationships the program staff has with one another. As stated by one administrator: "From that first meeting we have been a family. It's been rewarding, the investment in the kids."

All three of the administrators also discussed leadership roles they had had prior to their involvement with DCS, and discussed how they have adapted their leadership styles as DCS has expanded. To this end, one administrator indicated that they are always striving to improve their professional practice and indicated that having their own campus has provided for more autonomy of leadership (not all DCS programs are housed separately as the one in BUSD). Furthermore, another administrator indicated that having expertise in the public school setting has helped them greatly in providing leadership because DCS has to communicate with the public school district partner on an ongoing basis.

With regards to evaluation question #1, the administrators highlighted several key facets that underlie how the program works and intends to produce results. These characteristics included:

- *Internal Locus of Control* - As indicated by multiple administrators, teaching students to recognize that everything they do is a choice and that by making better choices they can improve outcomes in their life, is a fundamental purpose of the program. This idea largely represents the central goal of DCS and the underlying prerequisite to improving student behavior. Administrators also indicated that this philosophy is applied to how they interact with staff and parents (professional development and training offered through DCS often encourage staff and DCS parents to adopt this philosophy themselves).
- *Positive Behavioral Supports Model* - Administrators indicated that the program has adopted a Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS) model in working to create an environment that sets students up for success. As indicated by multiple administrators, it "all starts with staff" in creating this environment and that they utilize extensive professional development to get staff to use the same language and same procedures consistently in interacting with students and each other.
- *Clinical View of Behavior* - As indicated by one administrator, teaching all staff how to adopt different "clinical lenses" when viewing student behavior is an important strategy adopted by DCS. Specifically, staff is encouraged to not look at student misbehavior in a way that is personal or offensive, but rather analyze student behaviors in a way that is objective and systematic. Staff uses variations of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) to identify the underlying causes of misbehavior in order to address behavior on a more individualized level (i.e., conducting functional behavior analysis and identifying the setting, trigger, behavior, and consequences of maladaptive behavior).
- *Cognitive Restructuring* - Administrators indicated that the school has a period dedicated each day to social skills instruction. Using a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) model, these daily sessions, coupled with ongoing instruction provided to students individually by the school's lead psychologist, are intended to teach students replacement thought patterns and improve behavior. Additionally, a uniform set of "problem-solving steps" and a "stop and think" procedure are used in all the DCS classrooms in an effort to help students develop more constructive and less emotionally driven ways of handling negative emotions.
- *Reinforcement* - As discussed by multiple administrators, DCS uses a complex level system and token economy, as well as an immersive environment of positive interaction with teachers to reinforce positive student behaviors (teachers and behavioral technicians are expected to provide one positive interaction *per minute* to every student in their class). Pertaining to the classroom level system, the degree of freedom students possess in the school directly corresponds with what behavioral level the student has attained. Each class period, students are awarded behavioral points for following directions, completing assignments, and following class rules. As students earn points and meet their individual point goals each day, they move up in the level system. Moving up in the level system dictates things such as where students sit in the classroom, whether they are

allowed to have conversations with other students, whether they are allowed to eat lunch in the cafeteria and attend recess breaks, and a host of other school-based freedoms. The points students earn are recorded electronically each day and daily report cards are sent home to parents. To further reinforce behavior, students are also awarded a form of school currency for good behavior that they can use to purchase items in a school store.

Philosophically, through their own practices and research, DCS holds that the use of positive reinforcement is much more beneficial to students than utilizing forms of punishment. As articulated by one administrator:

*“Teaching and reinforcing what you want to see puts those other behaviors on extinction. It doesn't punish them. We're not here to be mean and use this punishing coercive approach. Punishment doesn't work; all it does is stop the behavior immediately. It doesn't teach what you should do; it just stops it and now there is a coercive relationship built because your using an emotional punishment based system. So instead you just don't reinforce that anymore and you teach and reinforce these replacements that have built in functionality.”*

- *Parent Training* – Speaking to evaluation question #4, multiple administrators indicated that the use of early and ongoing communication with parents is a key facet of their program. Administrators indicated that the school annually holds an open house, meets with each parent individually when their child begins attending the school, holds parent-training sessions, sends daily individual student progress reports home to parents, and conducts weekly phone conferences with parents. All three administrators indicated that getting parent buy-in is hugely important in fostering successful outcomes with their students. As stated by one administrator:

*“It's a night and day difference when a parent doesn't buy into the program. If a parent doesn't buy in, success rates drop drastically... When the parent comes on board...it just clicks and the kid gets it...When you get that buy-in, man is it awesome.”*

- *Professional Development* – Also in alignment with evaluation question #4, administrators cited that ongoing and frequent professional development for teachers and staff is a key facet of the program. The school conducts two weeks of training prior to the beginning of the school year, and also has weekly professional development sessions with teachers.
- *Consistency of Implementation* – Administrators cited that consistently implementing the program, its language, and its underlying philosophy, is the "concrete that holds the building together." One administrator indicated that through ongoing professional development, continual reinforcement of producing a unified culture among the DCS staff, and holding tightly to the program's core components, they feel the program is replicated well between classrooms and DCS sites.

**Strengths, challenges, and support concerning DCS.** In reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the program (evaluation question #4), participants next discussed what they perceived to be the greatest strength of their staff, what they felt were the biggest challenges of their job, and what degree of support they felt from their staff, the DCS program executives, district administration, parents, and students. Concerning the biggest strength of their staff, all three participants indicated they felt the commitment, buy-in, and overall attitude of their staff was their biggest strength. In this area, the participants stressed their staff's commitment to their students, to improving their practice on an ongoing basis, and to the program philosophy (one administrator joked that the staff would even use some of the program language with each other at the staff holiday party).

Concerning the biggest challenges associated with their job, two participants cited that expanding the program with fidelity is extremely important to them as DCS begins to include more students and continues to open programs in other districts. The administrators cited that hiring the right individuals (who have an open mindset to the program's philosophy) and holding closely to the program's key components will be important as the program expands. Other challenges cited by the participants included generating parent buy-in early in the process and managing multiple programs at the Buckeye Learning Center.

All three participants indicated that they felt very well supported by their staff and other representatives from the DCS program. All three participants also indicated that they felt very supported by district central administration, parents, and students. In this area, one administrator shared that the financial benefits of the partnership with districts are often quite appealing so it is often very easy for them to get the buy-in and support from the district:

*"I say to them: we can eliminate your headache. We're going to be able to educate these students with a financial model that is about \$20,000 dollars a student, you're going to be receiving \$24,000 a student (in state reimbursement dollars), right now you're spending \$40,000 to send them down the road. So do you want to spend in excess of your reimbursement by \$16,000? Or do you want us to come in and you net profit \$4,000? And you'll have a better product and your kids will reintegrate quicker by us being on your site. It's a really easy sell ...districts are generating \$30,000-\$40,000 dollars net profit per classroom, as opposed to spending an excess of \$150,000. Every district we've been in, I've been able to turn around their reimbursement rates or their financial costs by as much as \$400,000-\$600,000 dollars. In a year."*

Finally, participants shared what they felt were the areas in need of improvement for the DCS program. In this area, two participants offered suggestions. One participant reiterated the importance of keeping fidelity to the program's procedures and philosophies as the school grows and as DCS expands further in other districts. One participant shared that while they felt that the program's philosophy of teaching behavior through academics and developing positive behavior as a foundation for academic success were important, that they would like to see more technical focus on improving academic pedagogy moving forward. As outlined by the participant:

*“I think we could continue to grow on the academic side...Going back to that and knowing how important it is...A lot of our kids are dual diagnosed; they have learning disabilities and emotional disabilities so we want to make sure that we're staying up with all the cutting edge remedial techniques, programs, interventions. Those sort of things.”*

### **Teacher Focus Group Findings**

All DCS teachers (seven total) participated in focus group activities and were divided into two focus groups: one for elementary school teachers and the other for middle and high school teachers. Using the focus group script located in the Appendix, the research team engaged in discussions with each group of teachers concerning:

- Their experiences working with DCS
- The strategies they employ while teaching a special needs population
- Their perceptions of the program's effectiveness
- Their opinions concerning the program's strengths and weaknesses

Teachers' responses from both focus groups have been combined together to better identify group consensus across the entire DCS teaching staff. Although all teachers were invited to respond to all questions, teachers often adopted a conversational approach. The lack of an individual teacher's response does not signal a negative opinion on the topic, but rather indicates that either the teacher responded in a way that did not directly address the question or simply did not engage in that portion of the questioning.

**Initial involvement with DCS.** At the beginning of each focus group, teachers were asked to describe their initial involvement with DCS and whether they feel as though the program has changed their thinking about teaching students with behavioral difficulties or helped them grow as a teacher.

In this area, teachers were first asked to: "Briefly describe how you became involved with the DCS program and this school. What type of preparation or training have you received?" In response to this, five of the six respondents had previous teaching experience in various parts of the country where settings included private day centers, K-12 public school districts, and a residential treatment facility. This is the first post-graduation position for one of the respondents. The teachers discovered the position openings online, mainly. At the time of hire, new teachers participated in training programs and continued their professional development throughout the year, as noted by these comments:

*“I had a solid week of training in the program and 3 days of training in the crisis management.”*

*“Each year at the beginning of the year we do training on Desert Choice, PCM and also professional development throughout the week.”*

Teacher responses informed evaluation question #3 by responding to the question: "Has the DCS program changed your thinking about teaching students with emotional and behavioral challenges?" All of the teachers were in agreement that the DCS program has changed their view of teaching students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. As indicated by multiple participants, in this program, unlike others, there is an emphasis on the students' choices and free will decisions. One interviewee explained, "Once we fully grasp [it], everyone else benefits. Everyone understands that. It's a big adjustment but boundless." Other respondents reinforced this sentiment that the shifting toward internal locus of control leads to successful results:

*"Yes, it has. The Desert Choice School model takes on a whole new meaning in an E.D. setting or Gen ed. setting..."*

*"Compared to other special E.D. programs, the program is not punitive and inspires students and helps students take responsibility for their choices...That's a nice change."*

Lastly, in response to evaluation question #4, all five respondents said that they have grown individually as a result of joining DCS. Three teachers indicated that they have progressed as a result of professional development opportunities, and another teacher has benefited from the Learn It tuition reimbursement program, which has allowed them to pursue a Master's degree. Some professional development occurs indirectly as a result of interacting with one another, as noted by these comments:

*"We share ideas and we brainstorm constantly."*

*"I try to develop as a teacher and I go to my peers and ask how things work."*

*"Lots of opportunities to communicate. It's a good group."*

**Characterizing their experiences with DCS.** Teachers were next asked to discuss their experiences working with DCS, including what types of behaviors their students exhibited most frequently, what they tell their peers in the education community about DCS, and what they feel are the biggest differences working under the DCS approach.

Though minimally observed, the most common behavioral characteristic of DCS students cited by teachers was physically acting out anger or frustration through tantrums, screaming, or crying. However, teachers noted that over time, these behaviors became less frequent and students learned to communicate their feelings through language, not actions. Specifically, responses included:

*"The thing I see the most, a lot of my kids struggle with anger in general and not being able to deal with it in an appropriate manner...Now we're working on personal daily goals and I see them say, 'I got angry today and wasn't able to do it.'"*

*"I had a student who had difficulty self-regulating and he said, 'I'm having trouble using self-control because I didn't take my medication.' Before he would freak out or cry and this is so different."*

All respondents replied that they speak positively about DCS to their peers. Aside from the benefits of fewer students in the classroom, the teachers pointed to collegiality as a major advantage of the DCS program. One interviewee noted that many staff members simply do not use their sick days because "they want to be at work." Overwhelmingly, the teachers spoke about the DCS program adoringly:

*"I have the best job ever. They have the best program ever."*

*"I love my job and there's not a single day I don't love my job. I tell them to come check it out."*

*"We're pretty tight knit. We hang out on the weekends. We don't mind hanging out with each other. We've developed a family concept. We're here for the long term."*

In regards to evaluation question #2, teachers were asked, "What is the biggest difference in working under this type of approach? What aspects of the approach do you feel are strongest or most effective?" All respondents agreed that the DCS program effectively shifts responsibility onto the student and the choices that he or she makes. In doing so, this helps the teachers feel more justified in not internalizing student outcomes, which differs from many of the teachers' experiences in previous teaching positions. Teachers indicated that communicating these expectations to students is an effective approach that makes the DCS program successful for both the teachers and students. Specific comments included:

*"Our students do what they do because they want to. You can't get in trouble here. You can do whatever you want but you're not going anywhere. The students understand how the process works and that's why they're successful."*

*"The choice lies in the individual...There's so much stress associated with a job like this, when you start taking those things on...This program completely removes those thoughts from your mind. There are the consequences and that's it. This really takes out the personal thing. Working in case management, the stress starts to build and it doesn't feel like this to me here."*

**DCS support and pedagogical balance.** Teachers next discussed to what degree they felt supported by DCS central office staff, to what degree they are able to balance teaching behavioral conduct with academics, and to what degree they feel they are able to support the different needs of their students. All respondents indicated that they receive a high level of support from DCS staff. Two teachers specifically noted that making mistakes is an acceptable part of the growing process, and rather than being "hammered for every mistake," the teachers feel they are able to learn and improve from these mistakes. One teacher phrased this by saying,

"If we make a mistake, we model how to (correct) that mistake and move on." Overall, the teachers indicated that they feel well supported in their endeavors:

*"Like a honeycomb, everyone works together."*

*"They work very hard to provide the best possible support...Everybody here [puts] forth valiant effort and we're all learning together, how to get along and make it work."*

In reference to evaluation question #1, teachers were then asked, "To what degree are you able to balance the teaching of academics with behavior intervention and cognitive restructuring?" Five respondents replied that academic and behavioral components are not isolated; they are intertwined and each is reliant on the other throughout every day. The teachers also commented that they seize teaching moments when addressing behavioral issues. Further responses included:

*"We can talk about behaviors. It's always there. We can focus on academics and point out the behaviors because we have so many staff and visual support."*

*"Students cannot access academics if they don't display the behaviors to do so."*

*"With all the support that is provided, they connect. Everything is connected. Every time we work on the academic, the behavior is connected."*

Lastly in this area, all interviewees indicated that they felt adequately equipped to support the varying levels and needs of their students. The respondents attributed this to the depth of the DCS staff and the collaboration between all team members. Some of the specific responses included:

*"With the amount of assistance in each class...If we have a full staff with 12 students, there's always someone if you need help. If you need help, there are two or three people."*

*"Sometimes there are jive people there to help."*

**Challenges and improvements needed.** In reference to evaluation question #4, teachers discussed the aspects of DCS that they felt were most challenging to employ and offered insight into the areas of the program they felt could be improved.

Specifically, teachers were first asked, "Are there aspects of DCS that you view as weaker or more challenging to employ?" Most responses indicated the difficulty of time management with such high expectations for academics and the need for socialization. Two teachers identified parental support as the most challenging aspect of the job. These participants indicated that the home life of the students is something that teachers cannot control, and in some cases, this can undo what is being learned at DCS.



One teacher replied, "The biggest issue on paper is that his behavior has been awesome at school but has been going downhill at home." Other responses included:

*"The parents are in survival mode, trying to get by. A lot of our students don't have any sort of support."*

*"I think the only thing I'd like to see is some sort of program for after school or home. We do offer going to the student's home. We're so stretched, and one person facilitates all of that."*

*"With 6 hours a day it is more difficult to get in all of the academic rigor...it's a juggling act, and we work hard to do our best."*

Lastly, teachers offered some specific suggestions for how the DCS program could be improved, including providing more materials for behavioral technicians, obtaining updated textbooks, and offering leadership training for those interested. Overall, the teachers remarked positively about the program and several commented on its explosive growth. The behavioral technicians were considered to be extremely valuable and some suggested they could be utilized even further. Teacher responses in this area included:

*"Letting our techs find things they're interested in teaching and letting us know what they think will be beneficial."*

*"To me, it goes back to support and having two techs. It makes it so much easier and teachers don't have to deal with any of the behaviors so we can teach and they can help."*

*I think techs 'buying in' comes all the way from the top. Even back in PA, 30 miles from the mother company (the old education company the participant worked for), they didn't know who [the techs] were. Learn It is across the country and I see them far more and they'll hug you. It really starts there."*

## **Parent Interview Findings**

Five parents were selected by DCS to participate in interviews with the CRRE research team. Using the interview script attached in the Appendix, parents responded to questions concerning their overall experiences of having a child (or children) attend DCS, how they feel the school has impacted their child's life academically and behaviorally, and what they feel the school's overall strengths and weaknesses are.

**Initial involvement with DCS.** Respondents expressed a variety of reasons for enrolling their child in the DCS program, but three of the five parents specifically cited social and behavioral issues as the catalyst for moving to a DCS school. Four parents had one child enrolled in DCS and one parent had two children enrolled. Students' ages varied and included an 8-year old, three sophomores, a junior, and a senior in high school. Specific parent responses included:

*“He was running out of class and threatened to commit suicide. Because of these behaviors, the school did not feel he could remain there.”*

*“[His] behavior is very extreme and he becomes aggressive and a detriment to others ... At the time he was non-stop aggressive, attacking staff, bus drivers and even a disabled kid. We transferred him to DCS and they understood...”*

*“[She] was not doing well and was referred by the psychologist.”*

**DCS program impact.** All five interviewed parents responded to evaluation question #3 by indicating that they felt the program had a highly positive and often substantial impact on their child's life. All five parents gave examples of improvements they had seen in their children since they began attending DCS, with parents discussing both academic improvements (including improvements in grades, IEP progress, and content skills such as reading comprehension) and behavioral improvements (including attitude changes and improved perspective of "control"). Specific parent responses included:

*“Incredible changes. The program is so structured and positive and we use it at home with our other children. She just thrives and was in a really hard place.”*

*“He has had great improvement and strides in comprehension, reading skills, and really likes his teachers.”*

**Utilizing the program at home.** Four of the five parents interviewed expressed that they implement some or all of the program's attributes at home. The parent who responded that she does not utilize the program at home admits that she is aware of the parenting classes, but is unable to attend because of scheduling conflicts. However, she also stated she is optimistic about attending in the future. The parents who do transfer the program to their homes had the following to say:

*“When we do the positive, the response is overwhelming. She is more active in other activities and does great. She goes outside to play and everything has blossomed.”*

*“We use the rules at the house and I think that the other school has implemented the rules in his class.” (In addition to DCS, the student attends a local public school a portion of the day)*

*“Basically we practice the IEP. Being in the therapeutic field prior, we use coping skills he learns at school.”*

**Behavioral changes at home.** To measure evaluation question #3, parents were next asked, "Has your child's behavior at home changed with regard to interactions with the family? What about with accepting responsibility for consequences?" Four of the five parents indicated

that they believe their child's behavior has changed positively as a result of the DCS program, and the remaining parent indicated that although there is not "a big difference at home," there is progress being made at school. Multiple parents also indicated that their children are exhibiting greater acceptance of responsibility and consequences for actions. Specific parent responses included:

*"Definitely. He's a different kind of kid...He understands the consequences and takes accountability for it. At home, I carry out [the] same consequence as in school."*

*"He went from playing by himself to playing with his siblings and his sister a lot. He doesn't like getting in trouble..."*

*"Yes, absolutely...There is a complete transfer from one location to the other."*

**Changes in parenting style.** Also in accordance with evaluation question #3, four of the five interviewees acknowledged, often emphatically, that their parenting styles had changed since their child had been attending DCS. The respondents pointed to different authoritative approaches such as more leniency, patience, positivity, and communication. Changes in their children's behavior were also noted:

*"The violence is down and communication is up. We feel truly blessed...Every day she works out and before she did not want to get out of bed."*

*"When he needs a break or timeout, he implements it from what he learned at school and how he copes. That's better if a kid can understand without me having to tell him."*

**Parent involvement with the educational team.** In reference to evaluation question #1, parents were asked, "To what degree do you feel like an integral part of the educational team for your child?" All four of the parents who responded to the question agreed that they play an important role in their child's educational team. One respondent commented on the extensiveness of the educational team consisting of case managers, principals, psychologists, and other staff members, but did not address the question of whether or not they were an integral part of this team. One parent also indicated that although they felt included as part of the team, they were concerned that they did not often receive their child's graded homework. Most commonly, the parents interviewed indicated that they felt included and well informed. Some responses included:

*"I feel like a huge part. We're contacted weekly and given updates on her progress and they always have nice things to say."*

*"I feel like a part of the team, definitely. I feel that I'm included in all decisions and informed on what's going on."*

**Support from DCS.** Parents were next asked, "To what degree do you feel supported by DCS staff and the program?" The four parents who responded to this question all agreed that they felt completely supported by the DCS staff (one parent did not respond directly to this question). The interviewees cited the academic progress being made in the program being communicated as the most appreciated form of support. Without the support of the DCS program, one parent notes, "We would not have the stability in our home." Other responses included:

*"They're great. They support us and give us the tools to support him."*

*"Goodness, yes. This school notified me better than the other school. Everyday there's an activity line to sign and if there's a teacher's comment, it's always something positive."*

**Parent trainings.** In response to evaluation question #4, parents cited scheduling conflicts as a primary flaw in the program. Only one of the interviewed parents indicated that they have been able to participate consistently in the parent trainings hosted by DCS. Participants said that this is most often due to conflicting work schedules and long distance commutes. One interviewee pointed out that in order to attend the trainings they would have to find childcare for their other children at home. Specific responses included:

*"No I can't do it. I have a busy schedule (and) it's about a 20-minute drive. If I lived closer I could."*

*"I have a full-time responsibility, so there are times I can't do it..."*

**Communication with DCS.** Parents were next asked, "To what degree do you and DCS communicate about the program or your child's education in general? Do the teachers keep you informed?" All four respondents (one parent did not respond) replied that there is a high level of communication with the DCS staff. According to the responses, there is personal interaction on either a daily or weekly basis. Specific comments from the parents included:

*"I feel that it's excellent. The teacher had gone out of her way to keep me informed with everything going on with him."*

*"Every week we talk. Communication is really great."*

*"Any time I need to speak, I have their cell phone and we communicate on a daily basis."*

*"We really generally feel that the school here, the teachers, the administrators-when they talk to us, they talk to us straight from the heart, and when we talk they listen to us. And that is 100% better than where we were before (with previous schools)."*

**Parent involvement and DCS.** Parents were next asked, "To what degree is parent involvement a priority at DCS?" The three parents who commented (two parents did not

respond) noted the high prioritization of parental involvement at DCS. Two participations noted that this is a key ingredient for success and the parents felt they are welcomed and encouraged to be involved in their child's education (one participant did note, however, that they were concerned more parents do not attend parent meetings). Specific parent comments included:

*“I think that they really care that we're involved.”*

*“It's basically a dual function. If we can help with our child's education we get in there with DCS.”*

**DCS strengths.** In response to evaluation question #4, parents next discussed what they like most about DCS. In general, the parent interviewees liked the disciplined structure of the program, the open channels of communication with DCS staff, and the high performance expectations that are set. One respondent even expressed concern about their child leaving DCS and becoming immersed in an environment that lacks this amount of support: "I'm nervous about him returning to the school where he was previously enrolled. Now he is one of five and there would be one in 29." Overall, responses were overwhelmingly positive towards DCS, including:

*“That they can actually do their job and do what they say they're going to do.”*

*“Just her coming here has changed her outlook on education. She wants to go to college now. And I love how they're preparing her for that. I love that it's inspired her to think about tomorrow and hope for the following day.”*

*“It's helped him by leaps and bounds...I don't know if that would have happened at a different place.”*

*“I love the sincerity I feel when talking with the teachers. I love the integrity, the fact that they really care.”*

**DCS areas in need of refinement.** Lastly, parents were asked, "Is there anything that DCS could do better?" Two of the four respondents cited logistical issues that could be handled better, including changing bus schedules and better management of the parking lots. In regards to the DCS program, one parent made suggestions for improvement but stressed that the program was meeting their child's needs better than any other they have attended. Their suggestions included adding more programming to include more traditional P.E., music classes, library, and art classes, providing more direct opportunities for students to participate in enrichment activities such as sports, field trips, and school dances, and providing outlets for students to interact with each other after school. Specific parent comments in this area included:

*“I have no doubt that this is a fantastic behavioral management program. The self-management, self-regulating, learning how to understand your thoughts, being aware of your environment, being socially tuned in. All that is good. The big concern I have is what else is being done to make them feel normal? Do they play sports? No, they*

*have activities that borderline P.E. Do they have music classes? Do they have art classes? Do they have specials like they do in a regular school?"*

*"They've dotted their 'J's and crossed a lot of 'T's."*

*"I would be hesitant to change anything that; it may change the positive. We are so satisfied with everything and the staff, and this has been our saving grace."*

*"From my experience I think they're doing a great job for anyone with an autistic child."*

*"I think it's an awesome program and it has been wonderful for my son. I really don't have anything bad to say."*

### **Student Interview/Focus Group Findings**

Seven students were interviewed using the student interview script. To better facilitate conversational responses from students, most students were interviewed in groups of two (at the recommendation of DCS staff, one student was interviewed individually). Two of the students interviewed were in elementary school, one student was in middle school, and four students were in high school. Although the student interview script was used with all the student interviews, when necessary, the researchers made minor adjustments in questioning during the interviews to accommodate the various ages and communication abilities of the students.

**Overall experiences with DCS.** Students were first asked to discuss their overall experiences with attending DCS, including when they began attending, whether they feel that they are doing better in school since they began attending, and whether they would recommend the school to their friends.

Participating students ranged from being at the school for three years to only a few months, and many shared examples of specific instances that led to their removal from their previous schools. All seven students indicated that they either like the school or are glad that they are attending the school (two students did indicate that they did not like the school when they first began attending but now feel it is beneficial for them). Furthermore, all seven students indicated that they felt that attending DCS has helped them in school, often in substantial ways. Multiple students shared that they feel the school has helped with their abilities to "calm down" and better control their anger. Other improvements students shared included having less desire to use drugs since attending the school, experiencing less depression, and responding better to redirection from teachers. Lastly, five of the seven students indicated that they would recommend the school to their friends with one student sharing that they had already recommended the school (telling their friend about the school's composure room and point system). Of the students who said they would not recommend the school, both indicated that this was because they felt that their friends would become irritated with the school's procedures and policies. One of these participants stated however, "Most of my friends wouldn't like it because of the policies-although it would help

them BIG TIME." Other specific student comments in response to this series of questions included:

*"I like this school; it's nicer than the other schools."*

*"When I first started it was rough. I didn't get off level at first. Now I'm off level and I've maintained it a bit."*

*"It has helped me calm down-this is the perfect school."*

*"It has helped me better than any other school."*

**Comparing DCS to other schools, and the school's impact at home.** In relation to evaluation question #3, students were next asked to share how (if at all) attending DCS has influenced their behavior and how the school compares to others they have attended. Specifically, students discussed how they behave differently now compared to before they began attending DCS, whether they feel attending DCS has made them more successful in other settings (home, the community, etc.), and how DCS is different from other schools they have attended.

In response to this series of questions, multiple students shared examples of behavioral difficulties they experienced prior to attending DCS, including fighting, throwing-fits, controlling anger, and bullying. All seven students indicated that their behavior has improved since attending DCS. Six out of the seven students indicated as well that they felt that since attending DCS they were now more successful in other settings outside of school (such as home and the community). Pertaining to this, two students did share that they felt that because the conditions outside of school often differ greatly from DCS, they sometimes behave differently when they leave school. In discussing how DCS differs from other schools they have attended, students shared a variety of examples including the increased number of staff, how teachers respond to student questions right away, the problem-solving steps DCS teaches, the DCS classroom rules, and how the school is more strict than others. Specific student comments pertaining to this area of questioning included:

*"It is more calm here...Here it is a more positive atmosphere."*

*"It's so different. Most schools don't have their classrooms or the problem solving steps. It would be better if they did."*

**Strengths, weaknesses, and closing thoughts.** Lastly, students were asked to share what they perceived to be the biggest strengths and areas in need of improvement for DCS. Specifically, students discussed the facets of DCS that worked best (and least) for them, how they felt they were treated by teachers and staff, and closing thoughts on their experience attending the school thus far.

In response to this series of questions five out of seven students reported that they felt the teachers and staff at DCS were either "good" or better than others they had had at their previous schools. Of the remaining two students, one did not answer this question directly (the student highlighted how they felt their behavior in the community has improved) and the other stated that they felt like the teachers make a bigger deal out of misbehavior than they should. In discussing the aspects of DCS that they felt worked best for them, most students reiterated that they felt that the school has helped them. Some shared examples of aspects that "work best" including the DCS problem-solving steps, the sensory room, and that students and staff demonstrate compassion with each other. In offering suggestions for how DCS could be improved, students shared recommendations that included not separating students in the cafeteria, allowing actual competitions in gym class, the food, and eliminating all bullying. Specific student comments pertaining to this area of questioning included:

*"The problem-solving steps work best. It's a fact that you use problem solving. You use [it]every day."*

*"Sometimes when you do something minor it feels like they make it a bigger deal than they should."*

*"DCS is different because if you trip everyone will ask if you trip everyone will ask if you're okay. Other schools will laugh at you."*

## **Conclusions**

The findings presented in this case study evaluation of the Desert Choice Schools program in Buckeye, Arizona suggest notable support for the program and its potential impact on students with unique special needs in this district. Specifically, interviews with district leaders, as well as interviews with administrators and teachers from the DCS program indicate a strong degree of support for the program's goals and methods from various viewpoints. Furthermore, results yielded through these interviews qualitatively support the program's use in improving financial and programmatic special education practices within the district, as well as behavioral and academic outcomes for students. Interviews with DCS parents and students provided further qualitative support for the program's impact on student outcomes in terms of behavior at school and at home, academic performance, and psychological and social well-being. The disaggregated findings aligned with each of the evaluation questions as detailed below.

*What are typical practices and fidelity of program implementation in Desert Choice Schools?*

District leaders praised the program's ability to serve students with emotional disabilities. Leaders indicated the important impact that the program has with providing an alternative environment for this population of students that is both beneficial for these students and the classrooms on their other campuses. District leaders also stated that the program has substantial financial benefit in reducing their district's special education expenses.



*To what degree do teachers and support staff perceive the program and its strategies to be effective in supporting its defined goals and benefiting the school district?*

DCS administrator and teacher interviews illuminated the theoretical underpinnings of the DCS program, as well as the behavioral pedagogies that make the program distinct. Qualitative results from these interviews demonstrate a high degree of internal support and buy-in from the DCS staff pertaining to the program's vision and reflect a professional culture closely aligned with the program's mission and values.

*To what degree does the program appear to positively impact student behavior and academic achievement?*

DCS parents and students shared positive (and often substantially positive) opinions on the overall influence of the program. Both students and parents repeatedly cited behavioral improvements at school and at home. Examples of academic improvements were also shared. Furthermore, parents strongly praised the communication and support provided to them by the DCS staff and shared examples of the often substantial social and psychological improvements exhibited by their children during their time with DCS.

*What are the areas of relative program strengths and weaknesses?*

The strengths of the Learn It program varied for each group of respondents. District leaders and administrators value the cost effectiveness of the partnership with DCS, as well as its ability to offer targeted programmatic support for specialized populations of students and the cultivation of young or underdeveloped teachers. Likewise, teachers noted the tuition reimbursement opportunities as a strength of the program. Parents praised the disciplined structure and high expectations set forth by the program, and students referenced teacher quality as a strong facet of DCS.

Weaknesses relative to the program also varied by group. District leaders and administrators expressed a concern for maintaining the program's fidelity across districts: a critical piece in the program design. Parents cited the program's deficiencies to include logistical snafus and a lack of enrichment activities. Students critiqued the food, and expressed a desire for all bullying to be eliminated.

## **Discussion**

The findings generated through this evaluation demonstrate notable support for the DCS model as implemented in Buckeye, Arizona. As evidenced by the positive perceptions of the program's effectiveness from a variety of key viewpoints at enhancing an assortment of student-based outcomes (including psychological well-being, behavior at school and home, and learning in school), it appears that those served by DCS (i.e., DCS students and parents, the BUSD and

DUSD school districts) are very pleased with the program. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the familiarity, buy-in, and comfort expressed by DCS staff with implementing the program's strategies, as well as the frequency of program strategies observed during classroom walkthroughs, it appears that staff at DCS use the program model with fidelity.

With these overarching results in mind, several key findings call for further discussion. Namely, the nature of program implementation discussed by teachers and principals as well as the program's perceived overarching benefits for students and districts.

First, although quality of DCS model implementation was not specifically evaluated during the described project, analysis of data gathered through teacher focus groups, principal interviews, and building walk-throughs, do suggest that DCS staff are enthusiastic about the program and conscientiously utilize the program's strategies. Generally speaking, theories of instructional design often treat fidelity of implementation and interest on behalf of implementing practitioners as intermediary outcomes to a program achieving its goals. In other words, in order for programs such as DCS to successfully improve student behavior and student learning, it is assumed that teachers must implement the program consistently and how it is intended.

As supported (though indirectly) by data collected during this evaluation, these outcomes appear to be met. During researcher walk-throughs of the Buckeye Learning Center campus, elements of the DCS program were consistently exhibited across classrooms and grade levels. Among other things, classes with under 12 students, active support personnel in the form of behavior technicians and school psychologists, intensive amounts of positive interaction between staff and students, an active token economy, and active implementation of behavioral intervention strategies such as the classroom level system and problem-solving steps, were all exhibited openly throughout the school. Additionally, findings from administrator and teacher interviews reflected a high level of familiarity, buy-in, and comfort with implementing the DCS model across the staff. Ultimately, although further research is warranted concerning fidelity of program implementation with the DCS model, findings from this project suggest that staff at the case study site believe in, understand how to, and use the DCS program correctly.

Next, overarching findings from this evaluation suggest two distinct categories of impact that bear further discussion: district level and student level. First, in discussing their perceptions of the program's benefits within their districts, district leaders highlighted the programmatic and financial outcomes the program has accomplished and stressed that they felt very well supported by the DCS program. District leaders stressed the value of having a placement outside of their traditional campuses for students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties, and also discussed the impact this has for these students, as well as the students on their other campuses. Multiple district leaders highlighted that this was a population of students that previously their districts had a difficult time serving. Composite results from interviews with teachers, parents, and the district leaders indicated that students sent to DCS can be expulsion candidates, some have criminal histories and histories with substance abuse, and many have extremely severe emotional disorders. District leaders stressed that they felt their districts had a very difficult time serving these students prior to contracting with DCS. Prior to DCS, district leaders indicated that they would either attempt to serve these students on their traditional campuses or outsource their

services to other districts. Participants indicated that when attending school on their traditional public school campuses, these students were not having much success academically or behaviorally and were often a very disruptive presence. Furthermore, when these students were sent out of the district to receive services, it was extremely expensive to do so. Participants cited that their districts would often spend an excess of \$40,000 per student to have them outsourced (with one participant sharing that they had a student their district spent \$90,000 to outsource). Participants repeatedly stressed that the cost structure of the DCS program has been such that the money their districts receive in government reimbursement is now more than enough to cover their expenses with this population of students, while previously they needed to dramatically supplement their special education budgets. Furthermore, participants highlighted that they now feel much more confident about the services they are able to provide this population of students and that through the DCS placement, the climate on the campuses of their other schools has improved and this population of students is beginning to accomplish academic and behavioral successes that were not exhibited before.

Secondly, perceptions articulated by DCS parents and students highlighted that participants felt the program had a positive impact on student behavioral, psychological, and academic outcomes. Parents repeatedly articulated that they had seen improvements (often substantial) in their children's behavior at school and at home and many also shared examples of academic improvements their children made. The majority of parents interviewed indicated that they used elements of the DCS program at home, have altered their parenting styles since their child has begun attending DCS, and stressed that they feel very supported by DCS staff. Similarly, results from student interviews suggest that students feel very happy with their experiences at DCS, with many students highlighting the school's climate and strategies (e.g., the problem-solving steps) as facets from which they have drawn specific benefit.

With these overarching findings in mind, moving forward several recommendations are worth considering to enhance the DCS program. While all five groups of participants presented positive consensus concerning the program, suggestions for improvement included expanding the extracurricular options available to students at DCS, and continually refining the academic programming as DCS begins to encompass students with more diverse needs. Participants during the parent and student interviews both noted that expanding opportunities for students to take elective classes (including more traditional P.E., art, and music classes) and participate more readily in school sponsored extracurricular activities (such as sports and school dances) would be welcomed. Furthermore, several participants noted during interviews that though they believe that overall the program is effective academically, they would like to see further refinement in this area, especially as the school gradually incorporates students with more and more diverse disabilities. Lastly, district leader and DCS staff both articulated that as the program expands and begins to encompass more students and creates more campuses in other districts, maintaining fidelity to the DCS model will be crucial. Ultimately, it is worth considering the strategies and resources that may be most appropriate in facilitating this growth moving forward.

In closing, the results presented in this case study demonstrate notable support for the DCS program in potentially enhancing a variety of student outcomes within the realm of students with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties. The strong consensus demonstrated by each of the

outlined participant groups reflects the program's positive impact as perceived from a variety of important viewpoints. Moving forward, further research involving quantitative measures pertaining to these outcomes could be used to further corroborate these findings.

**Appendix**  
Interview/Focus Group Questions

Learn It Systems-Desert Choice Schools  
JHU Program Evaluation  
The Center for Research and Reform in Education

District Leaders Interview

*Hello. This is [insert name] with the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University -Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed! As a reminder, we're collaborating with Learn It Systems and the school district in evaluating parents', teachers', and administrators' experiences with and reactions to the DCS program.*

*The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be aggregated with those of others, and no information that could identify you will be reported. Do you have any questions before we start?*

1. Briefly tell me what you know about DCS and the involvement of the school district with this program.
2. Are there academic and programmatic benefits of having a partnership with DCS? Explain.
3. Are there financial benefits of having a partnership with DCS? Explain.
4. How does the partnership with DCS impact the district's approach to and success with serving special education students?
5. How does the DCS program compare to any of your other in-district programs? Is it overlapping? Compatible? Complimentary? What has been the most rewarding aspect of developing this partnership with DCS?
6. To what degree is DCS compatible with policies and standards for employing staff in the district?
7. To what degree (and how) are you supported by DCS staff and the program?
8. Do you feel that the level of communication between DCS and yourself is adequate to meet the needs of the district, parents, and students? Please explain.
9. To what degree do you feel that the needs of the district are adequately addressed/met by DCS staff and/or administration? Can you provide examples of how such needs are addressed?

Administrator Interview

*Hello. This is [insert name] with the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University - Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed! As a reminder, we're collaborating with Learn It Systems and the school district in evaluating parents', teachers', and administrators' experiences with and reactions to the DCS program.*

*The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be aggregated with those of others and no information that could identify you will be reported. Do you have any questions before we start?*

1. Briefly describe how you became involved with the DCS program. What type of preparation or training, if any, have you received?
2. Please describe how DCS is structured (i.e., how large are class sizes? How long are class periods? How are students grouped? Etc.)
3. Has DCS impacted your ability to provide leadership to your staff? Describe.
4. What do you feel is the greatest strength of your staff?
5. To what degree do you feel supported by staff and the program?
6. What aspect of your job do you find to be the most challenging?
7. To what degree do you feel supported by central administration, parents, and other administrators with regard to ensuring school success? [Prompts: students, staff, parents, programming, resources].
8. What improvements, if any, would you like to see to increase the effectiveness of the DCS program?
9. How do you support your staff with regard to classroom management, teaching to various ability levels, curriculum, etc.?

#### Teacher Interview/Focus Group

*Hello. This is [insert name] with the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University - Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed! As a reminder, we're collaborating with Learn It Systems and the school district in evaluating parents', teachers', and administrators' experiences with and reactions to the DCS program.*

*The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be aggregated with those of others, and no information that could identify you will be reported. Do you have any questions before we start?*

1. Briefly describe how you became involved with the DCS program and this school. What type of preparation or training have you received?
2. Has the DCS program changed your thinking about teaching students with emotional and behavioral challenges?
3. What are the behavioral characteristics of your students? In other words, what types of behaviors do your students exhibit frequently? What behaviors do they exhibit infrequently?
4. What do you tell your peers in the education community about DCS?
5. In what ways have you developed or grown as a teacher since joining DCS?
6. To what extent (and how) are you supported by DCS staff and the DCS program?
7. What is the biggest difference in working under this type of approach? What aspects of the approach do you feel are strongest or most effective?
8. Are there aspects of DCS that you view as weaker or more challenging to employ?
9. To what degree are you able to balance the teaching of academics with behavior intervention and cognitive restructuring?

10. To what degree are you able to support the different levels/needs of the students in your classroom?
11. In your opinion, are there ways that the DCS program can be improved for use here and other schools? Explain.

### Parent Interview (Focus Group)

*Hello. This is [insert name] with the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University - Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed! As a reminder, we're collaborating with Learn It Systems and the school district in evaluating parents', teachers', and administrators' experiences with and reactions to the DCS program.*

*The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be aggregated with those of others, and no information that could identify you will be reported. Do you have any questions before we start?*

1. How did your child become involved with the DCS program?
2. To what degree has the DCS program impacted your child's life? Explain.
3. Do you utilize the program at home? If so, describe
4. Has your child's behavior at home changed with regard to interactions with the family? What about with accepting responsibility for consequences? Describe.
5. Has your parenting style been modified since your child has been attending DCS? If so, how?
6. To what degree do you feel like an integral part of the educational team for your child?
7. To what degree do you feel supported by DCS staff and the program?
8. Do you participate in parent trainings? If so, are these beneficial?
9. To what degree do you and DCS communicate about the program or your child's education in general? Do the teachers keep you informed?
10. To what degree is parent involvement a priority at DCS?
11. What do you like most about DCS?
12. Is there anything that DCS could do better? Explain?

### Student Interview

*Hello. I am [insert name] with the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University -Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed! I'd like to learn about your experiences with the Desert Choice Schools (DCS) program that you are participating in. We are trying to help your school make the program as effective as possible. Your opinions are important to us and them.*

*The interview should take no more than 30 minutes. Your responses will be reported with those of other students, and no information that could identify you will be reported. Do you have any questions before we start?*

1. Briefly tell me about your experiences at DCS. When did you first start attending DCS?
2. Do you feel that attending DCS is helping you to do better in school? Why or why not?

3. Would you recommend DCS to your friends who don't go to DCS? Why or why not?
4. How do you behave NOW compared to before you attended DCS?
5. How is DCS different from other schools you've attended?
6. Do you feel attending DCS has helped you to be more successful in other settings, such as at home or in the community? If so, how has it helped?
7. What are your feelings about how you are treated by teachers and staff?
8. What parts of DCS do you feel work the best for you? Why?
9. What parts of DCS work less well for you? Why?
10. Is there anything else that you think we should know about DCS or your experiences attending
11. DCS?