

Executive Summary

Special Education Opportunities Review: Enhancing academic achievement and supports for students with special needs

MPS has engaged the District Management Council (DMC), a leading Boston-based firm that works with school districts across the country, to conduct a Special Education Opportunities Review on behalf of Minneapolis Public Schools.

As part of this review, DMC conducted extensive in-person interviews, online surveys, data analyses, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices and like communities, and online research. The review also involved extensive outreach to parents of students with special needs, including personal phone and email communications, 6 focus groups, and online and paper surveys available in 4 different languages.

The review highlights many of the strengths in the district and pinpoints interrelated opportunities to increase student achievement and utilize scarce resources more effectively. Several fundamental beliefs guided this review:

- Most students can master grade level content, including those with special needs.
- Effective core instruction is critical to a student’s learning. Most students, including those with special needs, must be exposed to grade level materials and high expectations.
- All systems can improve continuously, building upon the district’s current strengths, history, structure, and resources.
- Raising student achievement is possible within the MPS budget.

Commendations

Much is already going very well in Minneapolis Public Schools. These areas of strength may be built upon as the district strives to further improve its services and supports for struggling students.

1. The district offers many in-district programs for serving a wide range of student needs.

Interviews, data analysis, and classroom visits highlighted the district's commitment to serving a wide range of student needs. There are currently roughly 14 different types of citywide programs available for students with special needs. In addition, the number of students referred by the district to out of district programs is very few. This is a testament to the district's desire to appropriately and fully meet the needs of all students.

2. The district staff is very dedicated and passionate.

In Minneapolis, the central office and special education staff in schools are passionate about supporting students. They are committed to ensuring that students with disabilities succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Additionally, they are open to the idea of improving on their current practices to improve student outcomes.

3. The senior leadership and staff in MPS have a strong commitment to parent engagement.

A survey of parents of students with special needs indicates that most MPS parents feel well informed about their child's progress with regards to the IEP and that their opinions were taken into account while drafting the IEP. In addition, most parents felt that the teachers and administrators in the special education department are accessible and responsive to their requests.

Opportunities

Building upon these strengths and recognizing that all organizations can improve continuously; this Special Education Opportunities Review has identified a few high leverage areas for raising student achievement.

1. Develop a clear and consistent approach for providing reading instruction at the elementary level.

Reading is the gateway to all other learning. Writing, social studies, and science cannot be mastered without strong reading skills. Even modern math is full of word problems; reading and math success are highly correlated. Research has shown overwhelmingly that strong core instruction coupled with early intervention in reading can change the trajectory of a student's life; getting low-income students to read at grade level by third grade dramatically increases their chances of graduating on time. If students are still struggling to read at the end of third grade, it can be a lifelong challenge.

At Minneapolis Public Schools, a high number of students struggle to read at the elementary level:

- Only one in five elementary students with disabilities is above goal in language arts.
- Over half of regular education students also struggle in reading (below goal).

1a. Create an “intervention for all” approach to elementary reading.

Given the high numbers of struggling readers in the district at the elementary level and the need for strengthening the core reading instruction approach, the district should consider adopting a best practice approach toward elementary reading involving:

- A 2.5 hour/day literacy block in all schools
- Support/training for general education teachers through reading coaches
- Reading interventionists to assist classroom teachers during the reading block

1b. Ensure general education teachers take primary responsibility for the delivery of core instruction.

Implicit in the *intervention for all* model is a belief that both extra instructional time is important, but also that highly skilled and effective teaching is important. Best practice research suggests that students are best served academically when highly skilled and trained teachers provide core and intervention reading instruction.

1c. Build a data and accountability system to support the elementary reading program.

Any reading program is not likely to be effectively implemented without real-time data on student growth. Specifically, reading coaches will not be effective without knowing which teachers are in need of extra help. Likewise, teachers cannot be effective without knowing which students require extra attention and on which skills. Although the district has laid out benchmark assessments for each grade level to measure student achievement as part of Focused Instruction, many teachers expressed frustration with the current system. Developing a stronger data system will require that the district:

- Finalize benchmark assessments and standards
- Process the data into insightful reports
- Structure time during the week for teachers to review and make meaning of the data.

2. Implement large scale formal reading instruction at the secondary level.

Many urban school districts are faced with a situation where a large number of students at the middle and high school level struggle to read. In some school districts this proportion is as large as 50%.¹ Helping students who are not proficient in reading, especially struggling to comprehend, at the secondary level can feel daunting and yet most urban school districts have very little formal reading instruction at the secondary level. Best practice research suggests that all struggling readers, even in the secondary level, should be provided reading instruction (with a reading teacher) in addition to English.

2a. Develop mechanisms to identify struggling readers at the secondary level as well as track their success over time.

State assessments focus on Writing, Grammar and English Language Arts, in part taking for granted that students at the secondary level read on grade level. There is no state-provided assessment to determine which students are struggling to read. However, such an assessment would be invaluable to identify struggling readers, measure student progress or additional needs, highlight teacher best practices, and determine the effectiveness of supports being provided.

¹ MPS does not have universal screening to identify struggling readers at the secondary level, but low ELA and math scores on the MCA suggest that many students in MPS at the secondary level struggle to read.

2b. Provide opportunities within the school day for all struggling readers to receive at least 45 minutes of reading instruction in addition to the core English instruction.

Best practices show that the most effective method of supporting struggling readers is to provide them with additional instructional time, and to make sure that this time is spent with teachers with deep subject-specific knowledge and training. At the secondary level, the extra instructional time required for struggling students increases significantly relative to the elementary level, to make up for prior lost years. In MPS, it will be necessary to:

- Provide additional time for reading instruction, in addition to English instruction.
- Ensure all students who struggle to read receive rigorous academic instruction by skilled teachers of reading.

3. Ensure that the vast majority of students with special needs are expected to master grade level content, and are provided the exposure and support to do so.

MPS has dedicated and committed staff members who care deeply about the well-being of all students, especially those with special needs. However, interviews suggested that, historically and culturally, there has been a separation of general and special education at all levels. While there have been many recent signs of greater coordination, there are still elements of separation that keep special education students out of the purview of general education.

3a. Increase the number of students who are educated in an “inclusive” setting.

In MPS, many more students are served in settings III and IV (~40% of students with IEPs) than in some other districts. Expansion of inclusion would require that MPS:

- Build capacity of general education teachers to support inclusion.
- Provide needed supports in general education classrooms.

3b. Ensure there is no watering down of content or expectations for students who are not cognitively impaired.

Interviews revealed that in at least some high schools, students with IEPs in settings I and II are assigned to separate courses with a different curriculum (often with lower standards) than that for their non-special education peers. In addition, a survey of

Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) showed that only a small proportion of their time is spent in the general education classroom, implying that core instruction was being provided to these students in resource rooms.

Minneapolis Public Schools should consider the following:

- Provide all students access to core content curriculum.
- Provide extra help to the struggling students.

3c. Ensure that all students with special needs get extra help from teachers who are skilled in specific content areas.

Interviews suggested that nearly all remediation and intervention efforts for students with mild to moderate disabilities are taught by special education staff. Special education teachers may not be deeply trained in math, English, science, or social studies content, but rather trained in pedagogy and regulations. Additionally, MPS special education staff reported little coordination with general education content or instruction.

The neediest students need the strongest teachers. Therefore, MPS should:

- Assess the skills and training of staff providing remedial instruction to students with special needs.
- Provide support and training to general education teachers, and adjust human capital decisions as needed.

4. Maximize time and support for students with related services staff, such as speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and social work.

DMC conducted an extensive analysis of schedules to understand how staff service students and to fully understand the many demands on their time. A great deal of data was collected, and a number of opportunities emerged.

4a. Increase the amount of time speech and language clinicians, physical therapists, and occupational therapists spend with students, and more closely manage their case loads and group size through thoughtful scheduling.

Currently, a large proportion of related services staff time is spent on activities that do not involve providing therapy to students. Related service providers spend a significant amount of time completing paperwork, attending meetings, and completing other tasks.

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In addition, some staff work with students many more hours per week than others. Within many roles, it is typical for some staff members to spend over 25 hours per week with students while others spend less than 10 hours per week. This suggests that some staff may feel overwhelmed while others may have additional capacity to help out.

In order to maximize the support for students from these related service providers, the district can:

- Increase time related service providers spend in providing therapy to students.
- Balance staff workloads to minimize inequalities.
- Clarify staff roles and streamline IEP paperwork process.

4b. Consider redefining the role of social workers to increase the amount of counseling with students.

Similar to related service providers, a large proportion of social worker time is spent on activities other than providing counseling or crisis intervention services. To maximize their time with students, the district should:

- Clarify staff roles and streamline IEP paperwork process.
- Enable social workers to devote more time towards counseling students.

5. Flexibly match the staffing to enrollment of citywide classrooms, while ensuring the needs of students drive the placement of such programs.

Minneapolis Public Schools has a strong commitment to serving students with special needs in district, and has instituted a variety of citywide programs for that purpose. Applying management tools and systems to this network of citywide classrooms will allow the district to serve students with severe special needs more effectively.

5a. Flexibly match staffing to enrollment and existing guidelines.

Managing the network of citywide classrooms is a very challenging task. Student enrollment shifts daily and is unpredictable. Furthermore, assignment of 1:1 aides on a student's IEP may not take in to consideration aides already in the classroom. As a result, staffing and enrollment in citywide classrooms often deviate from the district guidelines. To improve services to students in citywide classrooms, the district may:

- Adjust staffing with shifts in enrollment.
- Create guidelines for allocating SEAs (Special Education Assistants) to citywide classrooms.

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5b. Create transparent, student centered rules around location and movement of special education citywide programs.

Although parents were generally pleased with special education staff, many felt as though students with special needs suffer disproportionately from changes in classroom locations. There is often a perception that the location of citywide classroom is decided by individual principals and when space “opens up” do to shifting general education enrollment. . A lack of clear and transparent processes for placing citywide programs adds to the concern that movement is not driven by student need. Therefore the district should attempt to:

- Institute clear and transparent processes for placing citywide programs across schools.
- Minimize change in location of citywide classrooms from year to year.

Conclusion

Several steps will be required as MPS charts out an implementation plan for the strategies outlined in the opportunities review. First, implementation will have to be extremely thoughtful, taking in to account what is already going well and what the potential roadblocks might be. Second, feedback will have to be gathered from a wide variety of stakeholders to ensure that diverse voices are heard. Third, the district will need to ensure that the plan to raise the achievement of students with special needs is closely aligned with the plan to raise the achievement for students without special needs. Finally, it will be necessary to take a measured, balanced approach toward instituting changes that is respectful of all students, families, and staff.