Minneapolis Public Schools

Special Education Opportunities Review: Improving Student Achievement While Controlling Costs

June, 2014

Introduction

The District Management Council (DMC) has conducted a Special Education Opportunities Review on behalf of the Minneapolis Public Schools. The review focuses equally on the academic achievement of students and on the cost effective use of limited financial resources. The study is conducted under the framework of the continuous improvement model. It does not try to determine what is good or bad, but rather creates a road map to help move a district to the next level of performance. This process acknowledges that all systems can improve and that opportunities for improvement are built upon the district's current strengths, history, structure, and resources.

The review compares current practice in the district to best practices drawn from similar systems around the country. It also incorporates a number of well-tested analytical tools. In all cases, the evaluation recognizes that increasing student achievement, managing costs, continuing to comply with state and federal regulations, and respecting children, parents, and staff are all important. Addressing one, while ignoring the others, is not an option.

The review respects the reality that school districts are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. Although a large variety of thoughtful ideas for improvement are possible, a short, targeted plan is more beneficial than a long laundry list of observations, options, and possible actions. To that end, a small number of high-potential, high-impact opportunities are recommended.

Not all opportunities listed in the document can be handled at once. Additionally, any of these opportunities would typically take 1-3 years of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out, with a commitment from the leadership to provide focus and stability during the implementation process.

The research for this project included extensive in-person interviews, online surveys, a deep look at hard data, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices and like communities, and online research. In addition, DMC conducted 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 Special Education Opportunities Review highlights many of the strengths in the district and pinpoints interrelated opportunities to increase student achievement and utilize scarce resources more effectively.

Commendations

1. The district offers many in-district programs for serving a wide range of student needs such as autism, emotional disturbance, and transition.

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. For example, the district currently offers various programs for students with autism or emotional disturbance from pre-kindergarten through high school. Transition programing is available to high school students who need extra help transitioning successfully into life after graduation. 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.

Being an educator is a demanding job, especially during times of tight budgets, rising expectations, and increasing numbers of students with significant needs. Most staff members (both general education and special education) are excited and optimistic about working in schools. They have great confidence in their leaders and colleagues, and want to do what is best for their students. Staff members in Minneapolis Public Schools are committed to ensuring that all struggling students thrive and have a tremendous amount of goodwill towards the district.

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.

Throughout the Special Education Opportunities Review, parents of students with special needs noted that district leadership is responsive and supportive of their needs. The leaders and staff in Minneapolis Public Schools engage with parents and incorporate their opinion while drafting and operationalizing important policies, especially with regard to special education. 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.

The district has also invested in cultural liaisons to help engage with parents from diverse communities in Minneapolis. This level of engagement with parents will help MPS become the district of choice for all families in Minneapolis.

Opportunities

Minneapolis Public Schools has many areas of strength to build on. 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 while controlling costs.

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:

Proficiency rates in elementary language arts (MCA, 2013)
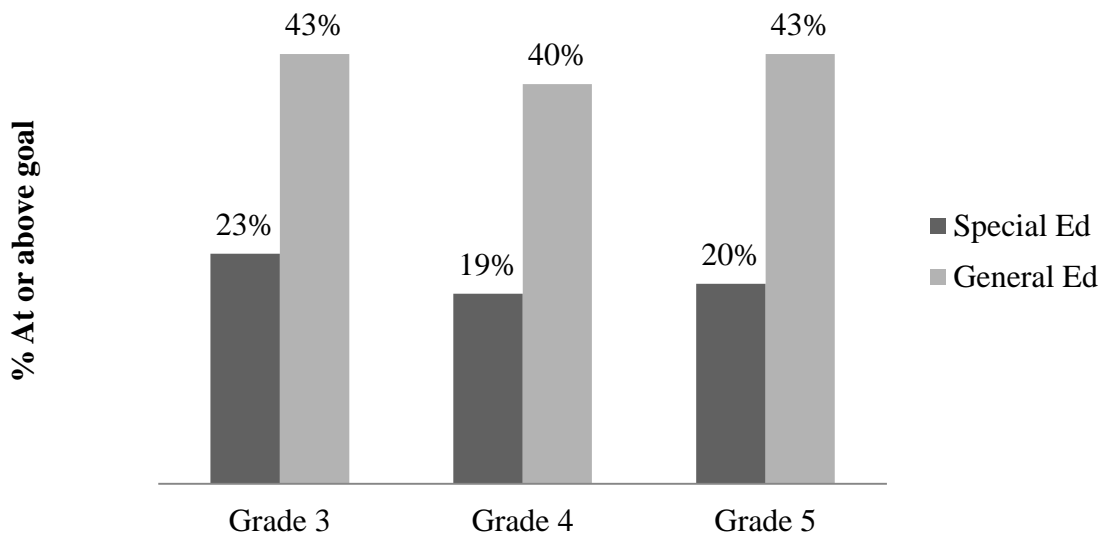
- Only one in five elementary students with disabilities is above goal in language arts.

- Over half of regular education students also struggle in reading (below goal).

Interviews, classroom visits, and surveys suggested that some approaches to teaching reading in the district are not fully aligned with best practice. For instance:

- There is a lack of consistency in the core reading program used across schools as evidenced by the different amounts of time spent in teaching reading across elementary schools. Not all schools have a 90 minute core reading block.

- Intervention support and special education instruction are not explicitly tied to the daily lesson a student receives during his or her core reading instruction.

- Students who struggle are supported by adults who are often not strong in the teaching of reading. Interviews suggested that some special educators lack specific training in how to deliver reading intervention.

- Intervention support reaches only a limited number of students – not all students who struggle.

Given the high number of students who struggle in reading and relatively early stages of the implementation of a best practice based reading program, the first step to improving student achievement in the district will be to develop a clear and consistent vision for reading instruction based on best practice.

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

Minneapolis Public School exhibits a strong commitment to reading intervention through the recent effort to implement the Response to Intervention (RTI) model in the district. However, the RTI model is based on the premise that roughly 15% of the total student population is behind grade level and thus requires intervention. However, with over 50% of the students at the elementary level not reading at grade level in MPS currently, the traditional RTI model will not easily or cost effectively meet the needs of all struggling readers.

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 an "intervention for all" approach to elementary reading. The district is already developing and implementing a set of "core programming" for elementary schools, which includes many features of an "intervention for all" approach. This approach would entail the following:

- Balanced instruction in the five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as part of a 2.5 hour per day literacy block.

- Principals would be responsible for accommodating the literacy block in the day's schedule, likely requiring scheduling help from central office. In some schools, the extra-long reading block is at a common time for a grade level, allowing students to be grouped and shared between grade level teachers.

- Provide significant support and training for general education teachers to provide effective reading instruction and small group interventions to all students through *reading coaches*. Key responsibilities of the reading coaches would include:
    - Training teachers on strategies to be able to provide differentiated instruction and support to struggling students (including those with mild to moderate disabilities).
    - Providing developmental feedback for teachers to consistently refine their skills.
    - Monitoring the fidelity of implementation of the literacy block across schools.

- Provide a small number of reading interventionists to assist during the reading block.

Implementing an intervention for all approach would provide effective and intensive reading instruction to students at the elementary level and ensure that strong reading practices are occurring consistently across all classrooms and grades. In the short run, these efforts are cost-neutral and, in the long run, they will be cost-effective.

1b. Ensure that general education teachers take primary responsibility for the delivery of core reading instruction to all students, including students with mild to moderate disabilities.

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. Teaching reading is not easy and special education teachers, Associate Educators (AEs), or Educational Assistants (EAs) are not often trained at teaching reading. Best practice research suggests that students are best served academically when highly skilled and trained teachers provides core and intervention reading instruction.

In MPS, Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) reported spending 76% of their time with students providing core academic instruction, including reading. Similarly, AEs and EAs also reported spending 70-77% of their time with students providing core academic instruction, with a significant proportion of the time spent teaching reading

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specifically. In addition, interviews with teachers and parents revealed that there is a general reliance on special education staff to provide core instruction to students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Students with mild to moderate special needs receive less instruction from general education teachers than in many best practice districts. Paraprofessionals, who are not certified teachers, or teachers trained to support students with special needs, often provide a great deal of instruction. Culturally, both general education and special education staff see this approach as beneficial since it allows special educators with specialized training to focus on smaller groups and more intense instruction. This assumes that specific skill and training, which most paraprofessionals do not have, is not key to effective teaching, which is contrary to the experience of districts that have closed the achievement gap.

SERT, EA, and AE activities[1]

Activity	% SERT time spent	% AE time spent	% EA time spent
Reading	36%	38%	46%
Math	34%	24%	25%
Writing	5%	3%	2%
Science	1%	3%	3%
Social studies	0%	2%	1%
Total academic service	**76%**	**70%**	**77%**

Behavior support	9%	14%	20%
Social skills	7%	1%	1%
Organizational skills	6%	5%	0%
Electives/specials	1%	0%	0%
Like skills	1%	10%	2%
Total non-academic service	**24%**	**30%**	**23%**

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[1] This is a proportion of the total time spent with students and not the total contractual work week.
SERTs are generally funded by Special Education, and serve students with IEPs; AEs and EAs are generally funded by general education and serve students without IEPs.

Financial impact

This district currently has a very large investment in providing extra help to struggling students at the elementary level. The support comes in three ways – (1) from Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) serving students with mild to moderate disabilities in resource programs; (2) from Associate Educators (AEs) who assist teachers in the general education classrooms with small group work, modification for struggling students, etc.; and (3) from Educational Assistants (EAs) who play a similar role to AEs and may also assist ESL students at the elementary level.

By contract the district must staff 1 SERT for every 23 students with an IEP placed in a resource program. The district, in an effort to provide high levels of support, staffs at a higher level. Taking into account the SERTs employed above mandatory staffing ratios and the funds used towards AEs and EAs, the district currently spends nearly $8,400,000 in funds (beyond what is required) to support struggling elementary students.

Funds currently allocated for reading instruction[2]

Role	Average direct service	Investment in instruction
SERTs (above mandatory staffing ratios)	55%	$0.5 million
AEs	65%	$4.4 million
EAs	49%	$0.3 million
Total funds allocated		**$5.2 million**

While a large scale instructional coaching effort is a large and expensive undertaking, it is less expensive than current efforts. In fact, a very robust effort could be supported, while maintaining SERTS at the 23:1 ratio and still free up approximately $1.2 million for other efforts.

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[2] Includes funds for staff at elementary schools and half of the staff at K-8 schools. These are funds beyond those that are required.

Funds needed for investment in elementary reading coaches

Total number of elementary classrooms	725
Total classroom teachers managed per coach	15
Total coaches required	49
Required investment	**$4.4 million**

Potential savings to redirect elsewhere	**$4.0 million**

Given state reimbursement policies, actual savings to the district will be less, depending on how the coaches are funded and what the savings are used for.

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

Interviews suggested that as part of focused instruction, the district has laid out benchmark assessments for each grade level to measure student achievement. This is an important component of an effective reading program. However, many teachers expressed frustration with data from the tests not being easily available for review and analysis. In addition, teachers reported that the benchmark assessments are not always aligned with the grade level curriculum they are teaching.

The successful implementation of an intensive intervention for all reading program will require an effective data cycle involving common assessments, consistent benchmarks, and a system of making the data easily available to teachers and principals, as well as structured time to review the data.

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 the skills they need to master. With meaningful analysis of data to assess student reading levels, the effectiveness of the program and strategies can be refined on an ongoing basis.

Development and implementation of a data and accountability system would entail the following:

- Finalize common benchmark assessments and achievement standards aligned with the curriculum for each grade.

- Identify and remedy bottlenecks in the current process of assessment data collection.

- Identify points of contact in each school to ensure all teachers input assessment data into the common data systems.

- Ensure consolidated data from common assessments is made available within 48 hours of the administration of the tests to all district officials, including principals and academic departments.

- Process the data into insightful reports.

- Structure time during the week for teachers to review and make meaning of the data.

Financial Impact

While a more detailed study would be required, initial review suggests that existing hardware and software is adequate for the task, but that procedures, practices, roles, and responsibilities would need to be streamlined and clarified.

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%. 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.

Low ELA scores on the MCA at the secondary level in MPS suggest that many students in MPS at the secondary level struggle to read. Low math scores can also be a result of low reading proficiency among students at the secondary level. The district does not have universal screening to identify struggling readers at the secondary level, thus no exact accounting can be shared.

ELA proficiency rates (MCA, 2013)
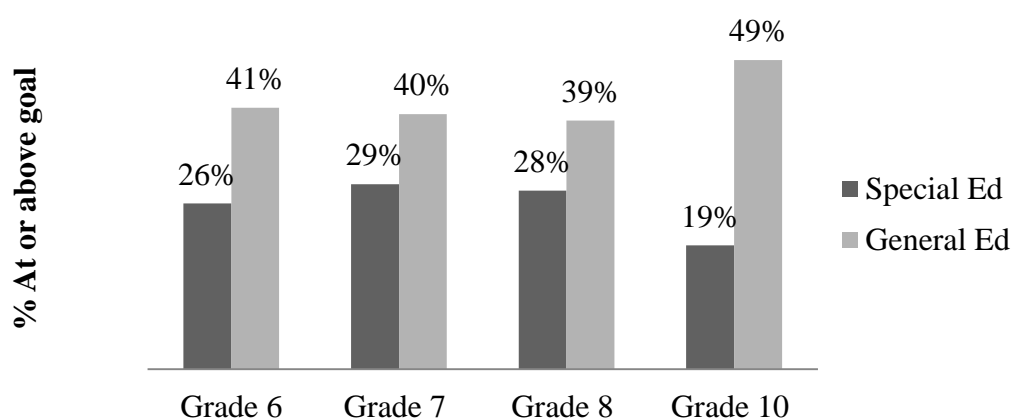
- Approximately 75% of secondary level students with disabilities are not on grade level.

- The gap between students with and without disabilities does not improve as students progress through the grades.

Math proficiency rates (MCA, 2013)
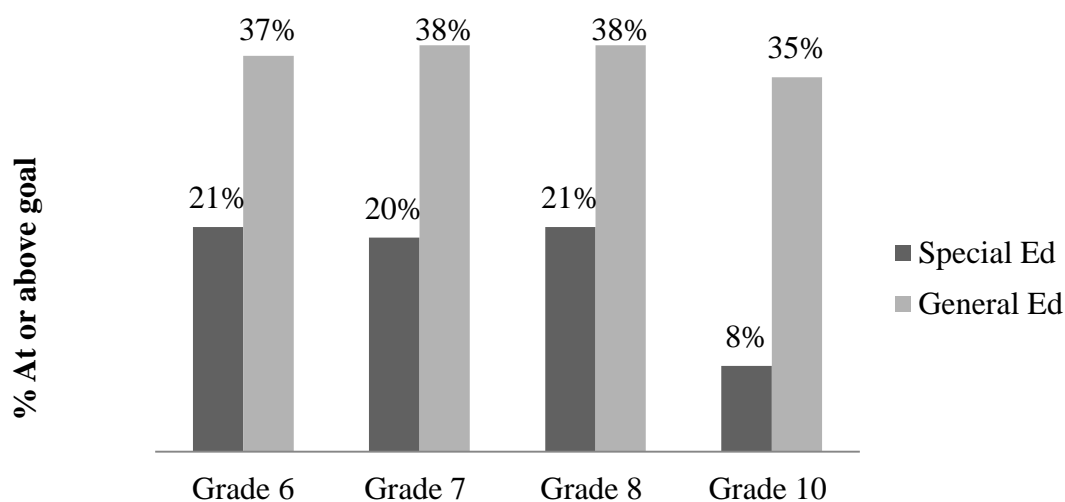
At MPS, interviews suggested that:

- While screening takes place at many middle schools to identify struggling readers at the start of the school year, the mechanism is not as well developed in K-8 schools.

- There is no consistent mechanism to identify struggling readers across schools. Some schools use benchmark assessments and others use classroom grades while others rely on the MCA scores. As a result, one student who may be identified as struggling in one school may not be identified as such in another school.

- A small number of struggling readers at the middle schools receive extra time with a reading specialist, but not all struggling readers are able to able to receive supports because of scheduling difficulties or the unavailability of staff.

- Students with IEPs in inclusion classrooms who struggle in reading receive supports from the special education teacher (as opposed to a reading specialist), who may not be highly skilled and trained in teaching reading.

- Students with IEPs at the high school level are sometimes assigned to separate English courses (that are taught by English specialists) that are replacement to their core content classes, but there is no formal instruction in reading for those who struggle to read.

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

Schools should screen all incoming students (using clear, consistent criteria) in all grades to identify struggling readers. 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.

These same assessments would be invaluable to measure student progress or additional needs, highlight teacher best practices, and determine the effectiveness of supports being provided.

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 dedicated 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 high achieving urban schools with longer school days, struggling readers at the secondary level are provided 90 to 180 minutes a day of reading instruction, until they reach grade level. This degree of support is not common in schools with traditional school days. In Minneapolis, providing any additional time for reading instruction may require a variety of changes, including adjusting district graduation requirements.

At MPS, all struggling readers (including those with special needs) should be provided at least 45 minutes of additional time on reading in addition to core English instruction. Typically, English teachers are not skilled and trained in teaching reading, and most special educators also have not had this training. Teaching secondary students to read is a very specialized skill. Therefore, reading specialists or teachers proficient in teaching reading should take primary responsibility for providing additional time to struggling students. This way, the district can ensure that all students who struggle are receiving rigorous academic content delivered by teachers with strong content expertise.

<u>Financial impact</u>

While there isn't extensive data available to accurately estimate the financial impact for the implementation of the reading instruction program at the secondary level, our experience indicates that the implementation of this best practice approach is likely to be cost-neutral in the short term and cost-effective in the long term.
The effort can be cost-neutral for a number of reasons:

- Currently, each SERT (who provides intervention support to students with IEPs) supports approximately 16-17 struggling students a year. A reading specialist on the other hand would be able to support approximately 75 students (assuming 5 periods of 45 minute sessions per day with a class size of 15 students). This implies that fewer staff members will be required to provide intensive reading instruction than the more generalized support provided today. Put another way, the same number of staff could serve 4.5 times as many students.

- Since reading intervention will most likely be provided to students during the time they would be taking other classes, fewer of these teachers would be needed, while more reading teachers would be needed. Typically, struggling readers either delay learning a foreign language, defer a core subject such as science or social studies for a year, or drop an elective of their choice.

A detailed study of secondary course offerings, class size, and staffing would be required to detail a cost-neutral strategy to provide reading instruction to struggling readers at the secondary level.

3. Ensure that the vast majority of students with disabilities 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. Interviews suggested that general education staff too often "pass the baton" for special education students once they are referred and assume special education staff will be primarily responsible for their learning.

As a result, the district serves a larger than average number of students in substantially separate settings.

- MPS employs 1.7 times as many special education teachers than like districts.

Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) who support students in the resource programs (primarily in settings I and II) reported spending majority of their time (74%) serving students in a resource room (as opposed to the general education classroom), and spending over half of their time teaching core academic skills.

SERT time spent across settings[3]

Setting	% time spent
Special education classroom/resource room	74%
Co-teaching general education classroom	14%
General education classroom (not co-teaching)	10%
Substantially separate classroom	2%

These statistics show that students with special needs typically receive highly intensive support primarily from the special education department. By relying so heavily on a pull out/replacement model, the district risks that its struggling students are never exposed to grade level material or high expectations. This is very detrimental to the achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities, who account for the vast majority of students with special needs.

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[3] This is as a proportion of the total time spent with students and not the total contracted work week.

The district identifies 19% of students as having special needs, and typically at least 75% of these students should receive grade level instruction and be expected to master grade level material.

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

Given the wide range of student needs in an urban district like MPS, a wide range of services and programming are necessary to serve the diverse special education population. MPS currently serves nearly 40% of its students with special needs in settings III and IV (meaning they receive their services outside of the general education setting for more than 60% of the school day), and nearly 50% of its students with special needs are served in citywide programs, which include students of all federal settings but tend to be separate from general education classrooms, with the exception of some students with autism and physical disabilities. The majority of students with special needs receive the preponderance of their academics away from the general education teacher.

Students with IEPs in citywide programs[4]

Description	Number of students
In settings III and IV	2,800
In settings I and II	3,600
Total students with IEPs	**6,400**
Across all citywide programs[5]	3,200

An inclusive environment, either full or partial, is a less restrictive setting than substantially separate placements, which only serve students with disabilities. An inclusive model classroom or program teaches students with special needs in the same general education classrooms with general education students and added supports. Inclusive practices benefit all students. It provides general education students with opportunities to support and socialize with their disabled peers, and to learn about varying abilities.

Research is clear; most students with disabilities perform better academically and gain more social and functional skills when they are educated with their non-disabled peers.

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[4] Excludes students in contract alternatives and non-public schools.
[5] This includes students across all settings and in all citywide programs. It does not include speech-only students or students in resource programs.

While a student-by-student review would be required to determine the exact number of students that could be served in a more inclusive setting, there are three reasons to believe that the district's enrollment in substantially separate programs could be cut in half over time. First, MPS serves nearly 40% of its students with special needs in substantially separate settings, while among similar urban districts nationwide the number is oftentimes closer to 20%. Second, measuring by all students in the district—and thereby accounting for differences in identification rate across districts—shows that 7% of MPS students are in substantially separate settings, while a national benchmarking suggests that only 3-4% of the total number of students in the district need be in this setting. Finally, of the students currently in setting III or in dedicated special education sites, over half are identified as having learning disabilities or emotional disabilities (SLD, SNAP, or EBD). Other districts have had success serving most of these students in inclusive settings.

Expansion of inclusion in MPS will require:

1. Increasing the number of students recommended for inclusive settings.

    -   Issue new guidelines for determining special education placements, clarifying that substantially separate classrooms are the exception, not the norm.

    -   Put in place accountability systems to monitor the percentage of students recommended for inclusive settings.

2. Building capacity of teachers and other staff to better support students with special needs in the inclusion classroom.

    -   Train special and general education teachers and facilitators on inclusive practices.

    -   Assign behaviorists to train teachers on effectively managing behavioral needs of students with special needs in general education classrooms in the least disruptive manner.

3. Provide needed supports in general education classrooms.

Financial impact

Expanding inclusion is an enormous cultural shift, which often takes years. Fortunately, not only is inclusion good for students, it is also cost-effective, which means substantial resources can be shifted to help smooth and expedite the transition, allowing the district to fund substantial inclusion supports.

Currently, the district spends over $10,000,000 on serving roughly 800 students in setting III classrooms, who might be better served in a more inclusive environment.

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Cost of educating students in citywide classrooms that might benefit from inclusion

Students in citywide classrooms in settings III and IV	1,600
Proportion of students	50%
Students who might benefit from inclusive settings	800
Number of classrooms	67
Total cost	**$10.7 million**

Assumes 12 students to a classroom and $160,000 per classroom.

The cost of inclusion is less because students are in larger classrooms, and specialized support is just for part of the day, not the full day.

Cost of educating students in inclusion classrooms

Number of students shifted	800
Number of classrooms required	35
Total cost	**$6.1 million**

Potential savings to redirect elsewhere	**$4.6 million**

Assumes 23 students to an inclusion classroom (a mix of general education and special education students) and $174,000 per classroom, which includes a general education teacher and a SERT.

These substantial cost savings may be reinvested in a variety of ways, including providing support and training for general education teachers, inclusion coaches, behaviorists, and financial incentives to schools via the budgeting process for shifting students to more inclusive settings to provide supports as directed by the principal.

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

The cultural separation between special education and general education not only has implications for students served in substantially separate classrooms, but for students served in inclusion classrooms as well. This is manifested in a variety of ways, including the practice of offering "replacement" courses to students with special needs who are not cognitively impaired. Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs) and special education teachers reported spending 74% and 66% of their time with students,

respectively, in resource rooms, often for many hours at a time with the same students, implying that core instruction was being provided to these students in resource rooms. [6]

SERT time spent across settings

Setting	% time spent
Special education classroom/resource room	74%
Co-teaching general education classroom	14%
General education classroom (not co-teaching)	10%
Substantially separate classroom	2%

Special education teacher time across settings

Setting	% time spent
Special education classroom/resource room	66%
Substantially separate classroom	19%
General education classroom (not co-teaching)	13%
Co-teaching general education classroom	2%

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.

Many urban school districts place struggling students in a classroom with modified curriculum (often with lower standards). As opposed to helping the student progress, it leads to the student falling further and further behind. Students cannot master grade level material if they are not taught grade level material. Best practice however, is to provide all students access to core content curriculum and simultaneously provide extra help for these struggling students.

Minneapolis Public Schools will benefit from remodeling the current practice of educating students with special needs, especially those with mild to moderate disabilities.

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

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[6] This is as a proportion of the total time spent with students and not the total contracted work week. SERTs are generally inclusion teachers, and Special Education Teachers are generally teachers in citywide programs.

Interviews suggested that nearly all remediation and intervention efforts for students with mild to moderate disabilities are taught by special education staff. As mentioned earlier, most special education staff may lack specific training in the content they teach. They are often not 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, it is all the more imperative that students with special needs learn from teachers with significant training and expertise. Best practice research suggests that students are best served academically when content strong teachers provide core instruction and much of the remediation and intervention as well.

The district will benefit from ensuring that students with mild to moderate disabilities receive intervention and remediation services from general education teachers. The role of the special education teacher could be redefined to support content strong teachers rather than providing direct instruction to struggling students.

3d. Assign a dedicated director to be in charge of teaching and learning for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

The success of any program or initiative depends on strong management and leadership. Currently, the special education department is organized such that there is no 'director level' leader in charge of resource/inclusion programs or support and intervention for students with special needs. No one person has the ultimate responsibility for the academic success of students with mild to moderate disabilities. This role would be focused exclusively on teaching and learning, rather than compliance, and would work hand in hand with the head of Chief Academic Officer.

The district would benefit from assigning a separate director to be in charge of teaching and learning for students with mild to moderate disabilities. The director would be responsible for the following:

- Reducing over-identification of students to special education.

- Ensuring that students with mild to moderate disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment.

- Managing the movement of students from citywide to general education classrooms.

- Ensuring that all students with special needs, especially those with mild to moderate disabilities, have access to grade level curriculum and receive adequate supports to excel in reading, math, and other content areas.

4. Tightly manage related services, 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. Special education staff members were requested to share their schedule for a typical week via an online tool.[7] A great deal of data was collected. A number of opportunities emerged, especially for related services to increase supports to children, to improve the equity of work load for staff, and to control costs without reducing needed services to students.

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.

Speech and language clinicians

Speech and language clinicians are an important component of many students' IEPs. They spend time working directly with students, while also participating in evaluations, report writing, and data analysis.

In Minneapolis Public Schools, close to 2,800 students receive speech services. This is approximately 45% of the total number of students with IEPs. With the large number of students being referred for speech and language services in MPS, the district employs a large number of speech and language clinicians (108.4 FTE).

A benchmarking analysis comparing the district's speech and language staffing to like districts across the nation indicated that MPS falls in the 96th percentile in terms of number of speech and language clinicians. In other words, only 4% of like districts have more speech and language staff than MPS, adjusted for total enrollment.

- The district has 2.3 times as many speech and language clinicians as like districts, adjusted for enrollment.

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[7] In Minnesota, student services are provided to children by school districts from birth. Some related service providers serve students from birth to three, and their schedules reflect this.

Speech and language staffing levels compared to like districts
(per 1,000 students)

	District	Like communities	Multiple
Speech and language clinicians	3.2	1.4	2.3x

Speech and language clinicians spend a great deal of time in meetings, planning, and assessing and doing paperwork.

- On average, they spend 41% of the contracted work week with students.

- As a point of comparison, a speech and language clinician might be expected in some districts to spend as much as 75% of his/her work time providing direct service to students.

Speech and language clinician activities

Activity	% time spent
Direct therapy with students	41%
Total direct service	**41%**

Paperwork/IEP writing/due process	10%
Planning/materials preparation	8%
IEP testing/assessment	6%
Personal lunch	5%
Collaboration with colleagues	4%
Medicaid billing/service documentation	4%
Travel	4%
Attend IEP/due process meeting	2%
Professional development/PLC	2%
Attend meeting (other than IEP/due process)	2%
Student observation	2%
Parent communication	1%
Coordination with outside agencies	1%
Equipment maintenance and fabrication	0%
Assigned school duties	0%
Activities outside of school day	8%
Total indirect service	**59%**

The clinicians provide a great deal of their services to students as 1:1 services, which is not the norm in many districts.

- 56% of time spent providing services is with a single child.

Speech and language clinician group size
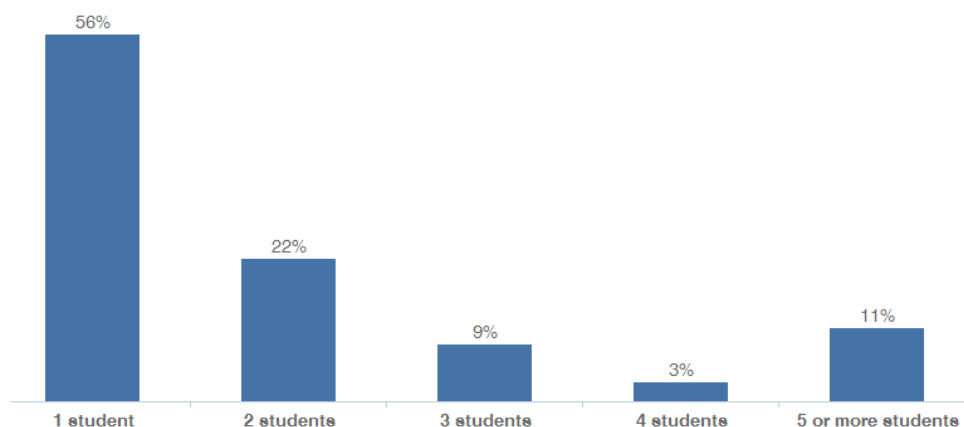
Financial impact

Rethinking the method for assigning speech and language clinicians to students could free up resources without reducing support to students.

By increasing the direct service time of all speech and language clinicians from 41% to 70% and increasing average group size from 2.1 to 3.0, the district could realize savings of approximately $5.8 million that could be used to fund other academic programs. These figures assume no change in IEPs and no reduction of services to students. Given state reimbursement policies, actual savings to the district will be approximately half of this total.

Because a greater than typical number of students with IEPs receive speech services in Minneapolis than in similar districts, more thoughtful entry and exit criteria would result in even greater savings. These dollars could then be reinvested in programs more likely to positively impact student achievement.

Occupational Therapists

Minneapolis employs approximately 33.4 FTE of occupational therapists and certified occupational therapy assistants. A benchmarking analysis comparing the district's occupational therapy staff to like districts across the nation indicated the district falls on the 97th percentile in terms of number of staff. In other words, only 3% of like districts have more occupational therapy staff than MPS, adjusted for enrollment.

- The district has 2.7 times as many occupational therapists as like districts, adjusted for enrollment.

Staffing levels compared to like districts
 (Per 1,000 Students)

	District	Like communities	Multiple
OTs and assistants	1.0	0.4	2.7x

On average, occupational therapy staff members reported spending 32% of their time providing direct service to students. However, this number varied significantly across staff members.

Occupational therapy staff activities

Activity	% time spent
Direct therapy with students	32%
Total direct service	**32%**

Activity	% time spent
Paperwork/IEP writing/due process	11%
Planning/materials preparation	7%
IEP testing/assessment	6%
Collaboration with colleagues	6%
Medicaid billing/service documentation	5%
Personal lunch	5%
Travel	4%
Equipment maintenance	2%
Attend IEP/due process meeting	2%
Student observation	2%
Attend meeting (other than IEP/due process)	2%
Professional development/PLC	1%
Coordination with outside agencies	0%
Parent communication	0%
Activities outside of school day	15%
Total indirect service	**68%**

Financial impact

Rethinking the schedule of occupational therapy staff could free up limited resources without reducing support to students.

By increasing the direct service time of all OTs from 32% to 70%, the district could realize approximately $1.6 million that could be shifted elsewhere. Given state reimbursement policies, actual savings to the district will be approximately half of this total.

Physical Therapists

Minneapolis employs approximately 11.8 FTE of physical therapists. A benchmarking analysis comparing the district's physical therapy staff to like districts across the nation indicated the MPS falls on the 84th percentile in terms of number of physical therapy

staff. In other words, 16% of like districts have more physical therapy staff members than MPS.

Staffing levels compared to like districts
(Per 1,000 students)

	District	Like communities	Multiple
Physical therapists	0.3	0.2	1.7x

On average, physical therapists reported spending 39% of their time providing direct service to students. However, some reported numbers as high as 60% and others as low as 0%.

Physical therapist activities

Activity	% time spent
Direct therapy with students	39%
Total direct service	**39%**

Travel	15%
Paperwork/IEP writing/due process	12%
Medicaid billing/service documentation	7%
Collaboration with colleagues	6%
IEP testing/assessment	3%
Personal Lunch	3%
Planning/materials preparation	3%
Attend meeting (other than IEP/due process)	2%
Attend IEP/due process meeting	2%
Equipment maintenance	2%
Coordination with outside agencies	1%
Professional development/PLC	1%
Student observation	1%
Parent communication	1%
Assigned school duties	0%
Activities outside of school day	2%
Total indirect service	**61%**

Financial impact

Rethinking the method for scheduling physical therapists to students could free up limited resources without reducing support to students.

By increasing the direct service time of all physical therapists from 39% to 70%, the district could realize approximately $450,000 that could be shifted elsewhere. Given state reimbursement policies, actual savings to the district will be approximately half of this total.

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

In many districts, psychologists and social workers both have a role in managing the IEP process. In MPS, psychologists currently conduct a reasonable number of evaluations (approximately 70 evaluations per year per psychologist). However, neither psychologists nor social workers reported spending more than 20% of their time providing counseling services to students. This implies that a significant increase in student counseling services can result from streamlining the due process and IEP related responsibilities.

Social worker activities

Activity	% time spent
Counseling/crisis intervention	20%
Total direct service	**20%**

Activity	% time spent
Paperwork/IEP writing/due process	12%
Attend IEP/due process meeting	10%
Assessment/testing/test scoring	1%
Student observation	1%
Total IEP related activities	**24%**

Activity	% time spent
Collaboration with colleagues	11%
Parent communication	7%
Agency coordination of supports and services	6%
Attend meeting (other than IEP/due process)	5%
Assigned school duties	5%
Planning/materials preparation	3%
Personal lunch	3%
Travel	2%
Medicaid/service documentation	0%
Other	14%
Total other indirect service	**56%**

Preliminary analysis suggests that if the IEP process was streamlined, it would be possible for psychologists to complete all necessary tasks without failing to comply with any regulations. In some districts that have invested in streamlining the IEP process, this is already the case. Doing so would reduce the amount of IEP responsibilities for social workers will allow social work staff to dedicate more time to counseling students. Reinvesting the 24% of time currently allocated to IEP paperwork and assessments, would allow for an additional 4,700 days of student counseling per year.

- This is the equivalent of adding more than 30 full time staff solely dedicated to counseling.

5. Tightly 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 programs for that purpose. Students with disabilities in the district are identified based on fourteen disability categories and may be provided supports categorized into four federal settings – I, II, III, IV (please see appendix).

In Minneapolis, most students in settings I and II are placed in resource programs located at their nearby schools, whereas students in settings III may be placed in a variety of citywide classrooms (e.g., CLASS, Life Skills, Autism, DCD, etc.). The district also operates two special education sites (Harrison and River Bend) that serve students in setting IV.

The district spends over $50 million towards educating students with special needs in these citywide classrooms.

Each of the citywide programs has staff allocation guidelines (including teachers, SEAs, and social workers) based on state statutes and MPS policies as shown in the table:

Citywide classroom staff allocation guidelines

Citywide classroom	Teachers (FTE)	Prep (FTE)	Social worker (FTE)	SEA (FTE)	SEA (Hours)	Class size (max)
Autism Elementary K-8	1.0	0.1	0.1	2	30.25	12
Autism MS/High School	1.0		0.1	2	30.25	12
CLASS Elementary	1.0	0.1	0.2	1.5	30.25	15
CLASS MS/High School	1.0		0.2	1.5	30.25	15
DCD Mild/Moderate	1.0	0.1	0.1	2	30.25	12
DCD Moderate/Severe	1.0		0.1	2	30.25	6
EBD	1.0		0.2	2	30	12
ECSE 3-5 Classroom	1.0		0.2	2	25	8
ECSE 3-5 Community	1.0		0.2			14
ECSE B-2	1.0		0.2			12
Lifeskills	1.0		0.2	1.5	30.25	15
Physically Impaired	1.0	0.1	0.1	2	30.25	12
SPAN	1.0		0.2	2	30.25	12
SPEN	1.0	.1	0.2	2	30.25	12

In addition to the guidelines above, certain student IEPs may necessitate the addition of extra staff to particular classrooms (e.g., an IEP mandating a one on one SEA). In some cases this extra staff may not have been required, based on the staff assigned to the program and the actual number of students in the class. For example, a class with full staffing, but half the maximum number of students, may not need the additional SEA.

For this and other reasons, the cost for a similar class varies greatly in some cases.

Range and median classroom costs across citywide classrooms[8]

No. of classrooms: 69   3   25   48   2   3   57   37   14   7   27
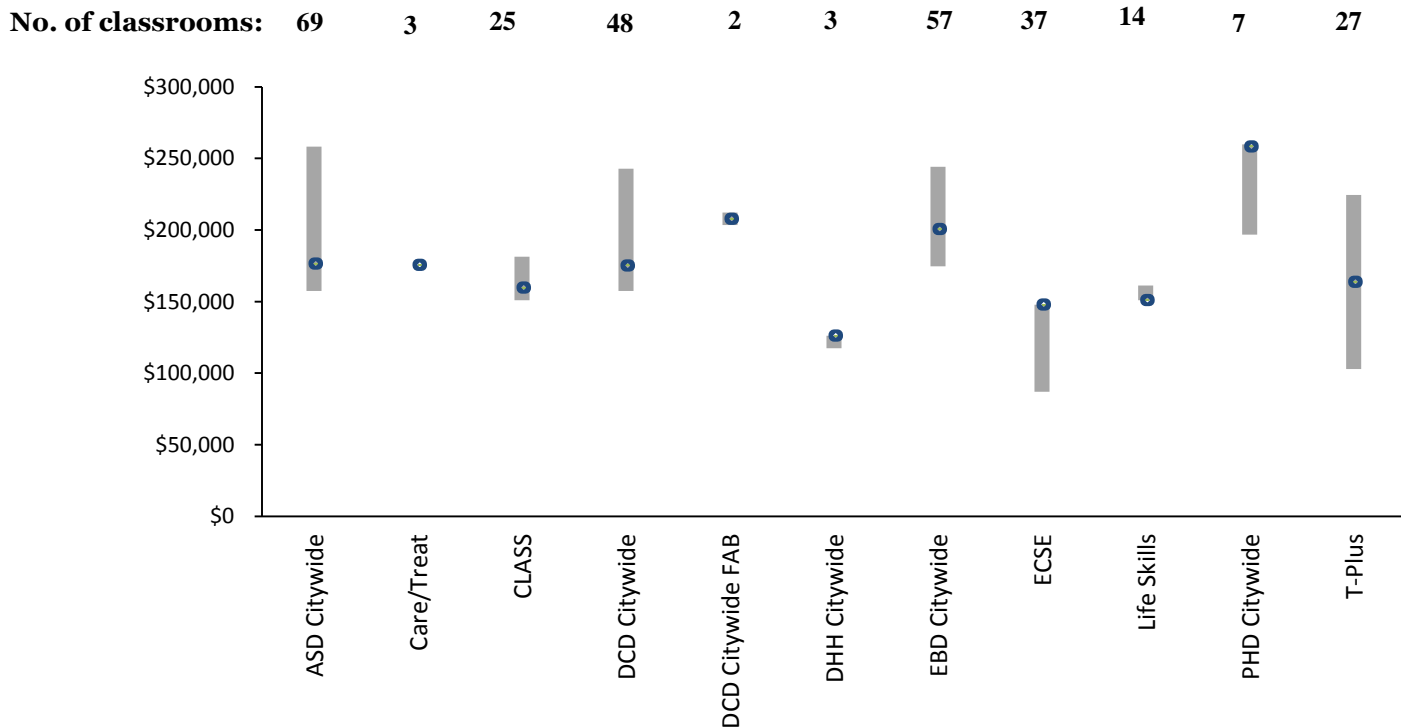
Average number of students across citywide classrooms[9]

Classroom type	Average number of students per classroom	Max number of students per classroom
ASD Citywide	7.5	12
Care/Treat	8.7	10
CLASS	11.6	15
DCD Citywide	6.5	9
DCD Citywide FAB	5.0	6
DHH Citywide	3.7	5
EBD Citywide	8.0	13
ECSE	8.9	19
Life Skills	12.1	16
PHD Citywide	9.0	12
T-Plus	9.6	18

Managing a network of citywide classrooms is a very challenging task. Student enrollment shifts daily and is unpredictable. The challenge is heightened since the

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[8] The number of classrooms of each program type was estimated using case managers, due to data availability.
[9] Numbers represent staffing and enrollment at a fixed point of time, but may fluctuate throughout the school year.
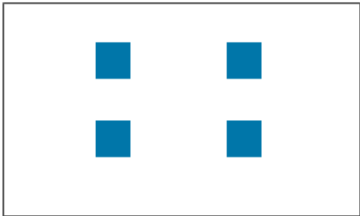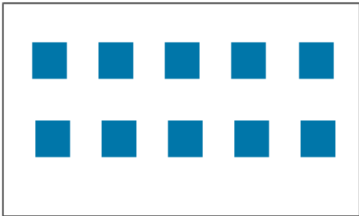
current system of categorization and data tracking of citywide classrooms is confusing. While most citywide classrooms serve students in settings III and IV with staff allocated to specific rooms, most students in the ASD citywide program are in setting I or II, and staff are assigned to a group of students, not specific classrooms.

Additionally, although SERTs and special education teachers are categorized and tracked separately, a comprehensive analysis of their schedules revealed that many have almost identical day-to-day jobs. This complicates any internal planning or analysis.

Differences in the number of students in a classroom results in large variations in per-pupil cost for students assigned to a citywide classroom of the same type, as shown below:

Variation in per pupil costs

(DCD mild to moderate classroom example)

	Classroom A	Classroom B
Teachers (FTE)	1.1	1.1
Social workers (FTE)	0.1	0.1
SEAs	2	2
Total cost of staff	$166,085	$166,085
Total students	4	10
Cost per student	$41,521	$16,608

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

Analyses of the current allocation of staff to citywide classrooms revealed that many citywide classrooms in the district have staffing levels of SEAs and teachers above the levels called for in the guidelines.

As mentioned earlier, this could be a result of SEAs being mandated on some students' IEP. A more detailed analysis would be required to determine the causes. The assignment of additional SEAs is likely only part of the explanation.

An analysis showed that staffing the current citywide classrooms in close alignment with the guidelines may result in savings of up to $5 million for the district. State reimbursement policies may diminish these savings by up to approximately half, depending on which funding sources are impacted.

The analysis of current staffing of citywide classrooms also showed that a number of classrooms even within the same school, program, and grade span do not have enrollment levels close to the guidelines mentioned. For instance, the CLASS program at a school currently serves 39 students in 4 classrooms, with a total cost of $638,000:

Current staffing for CLASS program
(Example school)

Classrooms	4
Students	39
SEAs	6
Teachers	4

However, given the class size target of 15 for the CLASS program, only 3 classrooms should be needed to serve up to 45 students. In this scenario, the total cost would be only $479,000, $159,000 (approximately 25%) less.

A first cut analysis suggested that consolidating classrooms within the current schools serving students in same programs and grade spans may result in savings approaching $10 million for the district, although state reimbursement policies may diminish these savings. This did not require moving programs to new schools or changing existing guidelines.

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

Adjusting to new environments can be traumatic for most students, especially so for students with special needs. Parent interviews indicated that the location of citywide classrooms in the district has historically depended on the willingness of principals in individual schools to host the programs and the year to year availability of space. When space is short, many parents of students with special needs feel their children are the first to bear the brunt. Additionally, they noted that the location of citywide programs may be changed from one year to another with very little notice to parents.

It is unclear to what extent these feelings reflect the typical placement of citywide programs, but interviews with principals confirmed that this does happen some times. The lack of a clear and transparent process for placing citywide programs adds greatly to the concern that student needs may not be driving some of these decisions.

5c. Reorganize the special education department organizational structure to better manage citywide programs.

In complex organizations like school districts, having clear roles and responsibilities, and the accompanying organizational structures, are necessary for teams and individuals to work and manage effectively. Currently, the special education department is organized under three directors. Each of the directors is responsible for one or more citywide programs, related services or special education sites. There is a broad division of programs such that programs related to emotional and behavioral supports fall under one director, autism programs under another, and all other programs under the third director.

However, there are a few things to take note of in the current organization of the special education department:

- There isn't an equal focus on staff and services related to teaching and learning for students with mild to moderate disabilities (as already mentioned earlier).

- While certain related services that serve all programs and all students like speech, DAPE, and OT/PT fall under one of the directors who is also in charge of selected programs, while others like social work, psychological, and nursing services fall directly under the Executive Director.

- The Executive Director of Special Education has numerous direct reports, including some of the managers of individual support services and the three directors who manage citywide classrooms.

The District Management Council

The district could benefit from re-examining the current structure in the special education department in a way that clarifies reporting lines, assigns responsibilities to individuals based on specific areas of expertise, and rationalizes the span of control across administrators in the department. In particular, the district could consider the following:

- Assign a separate director to be in charge of teaching and learning for students with mild to moderate disabilities

- Consider the addition of a separate director to manage all related service providers (i.e. social workers, psychologists, nurses, operational therapists, physical therapists, speech clinicians, assistive technology, visions, DAPE).

- Better align responsibilities among directors such that each director specializes in one of the disability categories among autism, behavior, and cognitive disability.

Each director could be in charge of managing and staffing the citywide classrooms related to the disability categories they manage. Staffing could be adjusted weekly based on shifting enrollment.

While this is broadly the case currently, some directors are in charge of related services in addition to citywide classrooms. In addition, students of the same disability may be placed into different programs making the management of student services and citywide classrooms difficult.

A revised organizational chart[10] may appear as follows:

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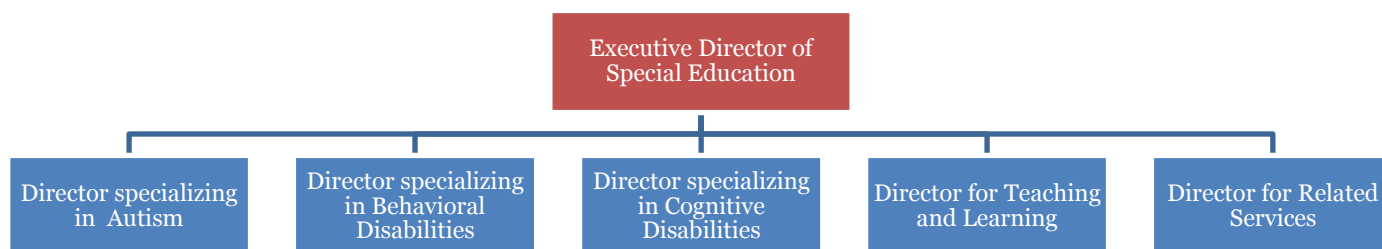
[10] The organizational chart is illustrative and does not include all offices currently within special education (e.g., compliance, student information, tuition billing, PIC/OCR, etc.).

<u>Appendix</u>

Disability Categories

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorders
D/HH	Deaf and Hard of Hearing
DCD-MM	Developmental Cognitive Disabilities – Mild to Moderate
DCD-SP	Developmental Cognitive Disabilities – Severe/Profound
DD	Developmental Delay
EBD	Emotional or Behavioral Disorders
OHD	Other Health Disabilities
PI	Physically Impaired
SLD	Specific Learning Disabilities
SLI	Speech and Language Impairments
SMI	Severe Multiple Impairments
SNAP	Students Needing Alternative Programming
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury
VI	Visually Impaired

Federal Settings

I	Receive special education outside the regular classroom for less than 20% of the school day
II	Receive special education outside the regular classroom for 20%-60% of the school day
III	Receive special education outside the regular classroom for greater than 60% of the school day
IV	Receive services in a public separate facility

Parent Survey

Between March 17th and March 31st 2014, DMC conducted a survey of all parents of students with disabilities in Minneapolis. The survey was provided online and in person through school social workers. It was available in 4 languages—English, Spanish, Somali, and Hmong. Below is a summary of responses.

1. **I am:**

A parent or guardian of a student with special needs.	92%
A parent or guardian of a general education student (no special needs)	2%
Other (please specify)	6%

2. **Which of the following best describe your child's primary and other disabilities?[11]**

Developmental delay	19%
Hearing impairments	7%
Autism	44%
Speech or language impairments	23%
Orthopedic impairments	3%
Deaf-blindness	0%
Traumatic brain injury	2%
Visual impairments	3%
Emotional disturbance	11%
Specific learning disability	17%
Multiple disabilities	4%
Other health impairments	9%
Developmental and cognitive disability	8%

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[11] Totals do not sum to 100% because respondents were able to choose multiple items.

3. My child is in the following special education program:[12]

	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3	Setting 4	Total
Resource	24%	3%	0%	0%	**27%**
Autism Citywide	20%	5%	5%	0%	**31%**
Care and Treatment	1%	0%	0%	1%	**2%**
CLASS	3%	0%	3%	0%	**6%**
DCD Citywide	4%	3%	2%	0%	**9%**
DHH Citywide	4%	1%	1%	0%	**5%**
EBD Citywide	4%	0%	2%	1%	**6%**
ECSE	9%	0%	1%	1%	**11%**
Lifeskills	5%	1%	0%	0%	**5%**
PHD Citywide	3%	0%	1%	0%	**4%**
Transition Plus	4%	0%	1%	0%	**5%**

4. My child attends:[9]

Pre-K	6%
Elementary School	43%
Middle School	23%
K-8 School	9%
High School	20%
Transition Plus	4%

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[12] Totals do not sum to 100% because respondents were able to choose multiple items.

5. Which of the following statements concerning your child's education over the last 12 months do you generally agree with?

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagree
Overall, I am pleased with the quality of my child's education as a student in Minneapolis Public Schools.	31%	43%	**74%**	17%	9%	**26%**
Overall, I am pleased with the quality of the special education support and services my child receives.	38%	34%	**72%**	16%	12%	**28%**
I believe my child receives the appropriate amount of special education services.	33%	33%	**66%**	22%	12%	**34%**
Availability of staff and school schedule influences what services or the frequency of services my child receives.	40%	44%	**84%**	10%	6%	**16%**
My child is appropriately challenged in his or her academic work.	30%	40%	**70%**	23%	7%	**30%**
My child's IEP is implemented as specified in the document.	43%	40%	**83%**	12%	5%	**17%**
Overall, I believe that my child benefits from the IEP services, programs, and accommodations provided.	47%	40%	**87%**	7%	6%	**13%**
I'm satisfied with the quality and quantity of social, academic and classroom inclusion provided to my child.	40%	36%	**76%**	12%	12%	**24%**
I'm satisfied with transition planning in the district for each shift in school-- preK to K, elementary to middle, middle to high school, high school to transition plus and beyond.	23%	41%	**64%**	23%	14%	**37%**

6. **Which of the following statements concerning the IEP referral process do you generally agree with?**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagree
The initial referral to special education was made at the appropriate time in my child's education.	56%	20%	**76%**	12%	12%	**24%**
The initial referral was made by me at the recommendation of my child's teacher.	14%	29%	**43%**	24%	33%	**57%**
The initial referral was made by the Intervention Team.	16%	20%	**36%**	18%	46%	**64%**
I have a clear understanding of why my child qualified for special education services.	83%	12%	**95%**	3%	2%	**5%**

7. **Which of the following statements regarding the development of your child's IEP do you generally agree with?**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagree
My comments, recommendations and/or concerns are considered when developing my child's IEP.	55%	35%	**90%**	6%	4%	**10%**
I'm satisfied with the IEP placement and availability of school choice.	41%	32%	**73%**	16%	12%	**28%**
Overall, I'm satisfied with the IEP development process (including the IEP meeting experience and the result).	40%	35%	**75%**	13%	12%	**25%**

8. **Which of the following statements regarding communication around your child's development and IEP do you generally agree with?**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagree
I receive progress reports and communication from my child's general education teacher.	39%	27%	**66%**	20%	14%	**34%**
I receive specific information regarding progress towards meeting goals of the IEP at each progress marking period.	45%	31%	**76%**	17%	7%	**24%**
If I have questions about my child's progress, program or services, I know who to call.	66%	22%	**88%**	11%	1%	**12%**
Administrators in the Special Education department at MPS are accessible and are responsive to my requests.	40%	34%	**74%**	17%	9%	**26%**

9. **Which of the following statements concerning the school community and climate do you generally agree with?**

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total Disagree
My child is valued, understood and/or welcomed within the school community.	53%	28%	**81%**	11%	8%	**19%**
I'm treated with respect in my interaction with school teachers, administrators and others in MPS.	64%	28%	**92%**	6%	2%	**8%**
My child's teachers have high expectations for my child's achievement at school.	44%	36%	**80%**	12%	7%	**19%**

10. **What aspects of special education in the district are you most pleased with?**

Key Themes

Adequate supports

- "My child has received all of the services he needs from his school."
- "[I am] pleased that [my son] is receiving the one on one support that he needs."
- "I think he is getting the help that he needs"
- "My child has received all of the service she needs from his school"
- "My child can receive special education services as needed, and can also participate in the mainstream classroom setting when possible"

Dedicated, caring staff

- "His teachers are all wonderful—so caring and responsive. I can tell they genuinely care about my child's learning and well-being at school, and they take joy in all of his accomplishments. I never worry about him while he's at school because I know he is so well looked after."
- "The teaching team has been great. Know our child well. Responsive to feedback from parents. Flexible and willing to work with us."

- "Every single person I have ever dealt with in the Special Education department of all three of my son's schools cared deeply for him and for his success."
- "We have worked with some amazing educators."
- "We love our special ed teacher!!!!!! And some regular teachers."

Responsiveness to parent requests

- "The team listens to my thoughts and discusses or implements my ideas if appropriate."
- "[The teaching team is] flexible and willing to work with us."
- "I was very impressed with the meeting to plan my son's IEP as he entered kindergarten. When they presented their ideas for what they would offer, I suggested that perhaps given the transition to kindergarten we would want to start out with more services. We did this, and within 2 months re-evaluated it and were able to reduce the time that services were needed. But they were very open to my concern about the transition and met my expectations by increasing the amount of services he would receive initially. We are very pleased with the process to date."
- "Professionalism, approachability and availability to meet."

Strong related services

- "All the speech clinicians that we have interacted with are absolutely amazing."
- "Good OT and PT and speech teachers."
- "[I am pleased with] therapists."
- "[I am] thrilled that she has mastered her 'r' sound and no longer needs speech therapy and that it was taken care of before she suffered any social ramifications."
- "The teachers my child has had in his four years of speech therapy have overall been excellent. I have never had any questions or concerns that they have not been able to address."

11. **If the district could make one or two changes to better meet the needs of students with special needs, we should:**

    Key Themes

    Provide more staff and smaller classes

    - "Provide more staff and/or classroom aides to assist with general needs in the classroom."
    - "More SEA time, more Spec Ed teacher time: why is this constantly cut back in the budget?"

- "Smaller classrooms - in 4th grade, my son had 35 kids in his class. That is a difficult learning environment for regular ed students and an impossible environment for special ed students."
- "Establish smaller classrooms. 35 students, some with special needs, and one teacher - wow!"
- "Reduce classroom sizes in all areas of the city."

Increase support for general education teachers

- "Coordinate with the core class teachers and accommodate the needs in those classes. There is a small disconnect in that regard."
- "More training and resources for general ed teachers to cope with high number of EBD students on the North Side."
- "More training for classroom teachers to understand difficulties of slower learners and those with executive function issues."
- "Provide the General Education Teachers with a better understanding of Autism and its challenges."

Increase inclusion

- "Promote mainstreaming students performing well. Currently principals and general education teachers do not want EBD students to be included, even though it is a legal obligation."
- "Develop an educational philosophy that includes inclusion on a real and meaningful level and not just pay lip service to the idea of inclusion."
- "Empower leadership in the schools to make inclusion a priority."
- "Even more integration. Don't keep my daughter in one 'team' location while other students rotate teams just because it's easier for her to be up front. She misses out on making friends with kids who behave and get to sit towards the back because they don't need as much help or watching. Give her the opportunity to mingle more even if it's more difficult to facilitate."
- "Train staff and administrators about including special needs students in all programs."

Increase frequency of communication with parents

- "The district needs to work on its communication with the special needs parents. More communication is always better when dealing with special needs children."
- "Better communication. I feel there should be scheduled parent/teacher conferences on a per-quarter basis just as the general education teachers are required to have."