



St. Cloud Area School District #742
Special Education Opportunities Review
December 13, 2011

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Introduction

The District Management Council (DMC) is conducting two reports on behalf of St. Cloud Area School District 742. The first is a comparative report of special education data derived from state and district resources. That report compares the finances and operations of St. Cloud Area School District to five comparative districts chosen by the district in 2005. This report is a Special Education Opportunities Review, which provides a deeper look into the district's special education practices, how it supports the academic achievement of students with special needs, and its overall effectiveness.

The study does not try to determine what is good or bad, but rather creates a road map to help move St. Cloud 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 school district to best practices drawn from similar districts 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, and respecting students, parents, and staff are equally important. Addressing one, while ignoring the others, is not an option.

The Opportunities Review also respects the reality that school systems are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. To that end, only a small number of high-potential, high-impact, and high-leverage opportunities are identified. A short, targeted plan is more beneficial than a long laundry list of observations, options, and possible actions.

The research includes extensive in-person interviews, online surveys, a deep look at hard data, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices and like communities, and online research. Extensive financial analysis and a review of existing reports and documents were also conducted.

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Commendations

1. Staff have a passion and commitment to ensure that students with special needs achieve academically, socially, and emotionally at high levels.

Providing special education programming is among the most difficult jobs in a school district, especially in times of tight budgets, rising expectations, and increasing numbers of students with significant needs. In St. Cloud Area Schools, the staff at the district and school level are extremely knowledgeable about special education best practices, as well as many best practices for supporting all struggling learners. Importantly, they have demonstrated high expectations for the achievement of students with special needs academically, socially, and emotionally.

In addition, school visits and interviews with district staff revealed a plethora of data being gathered and used in the district. Data retreats are conducted regularly in schools and pinpoint specific areas of need for all students who struggle including students with limited English proficiency, special needs, and students eligible for free and reduced lunch. The district spends significant time assessing achievement between students to identify which areas need additional focus. This practice can be integrated between classrooms and between schools. By identifying teachers and schools with increased student growth may provide valuable insights to the entire St. Cloud community. Sharing best practices is vital to ensure all students gain access to tailored instruction for their needs.

2. The district is committed to early intervention and remediation to provide additional support to all students who struggle.

St. Cloud Area School District 742 has a strong commitment to early intervention, especially in elementary reading, which is aligned to best practices. Best practice research suggests that early intervention programs should identify struggling readers and provide them with additional instructional time with a standards-based reading program while monitoring progress and growth. St. Cloud has adopted standards-based reading programs such as Read 180, Expert 21, and System 44. The district invests well over \$4 million in remediation and intervention programs (outside of its offerings in ESL), including the provision of over 90 FTE dedicated to these programs.

One benefit of early intervention programs should be a reduced rate of identification of students with IEPs. Currently, St. Cloud has a high identification rate of 17% including non-public students (21% if public only), well above the Minnesota state average of 14%. Through consistent usage of these programs, in addition to core reading instruction and monitoring of student progress, the district will be able to support a greater percentage of students who struggle within the general education setting – reducing the need for specialized support. Early intervention will also enable St. Cloud to continue to prevent disproportionality in IEP identification in race, gender, Limited

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English Proficient status, or students eligible for free and reduced lunch, by supporting challenges in reading, for example, by targeted intervention in reading.

3. Awareness of the Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM) is growing in the district and will provide more time on task and provide rigorous standards to more students in the general education setting.

Inclusion is already a district norm and has been in practice since the 1980s. This foundation allows the district to rethink the placement and supports for all students. The result of this commitment to inclusion is the low percentage of students in self-contained settings in the district. In comparison to the five selected districts, St. Cloud has the lowest percent of students in self-contained settings.

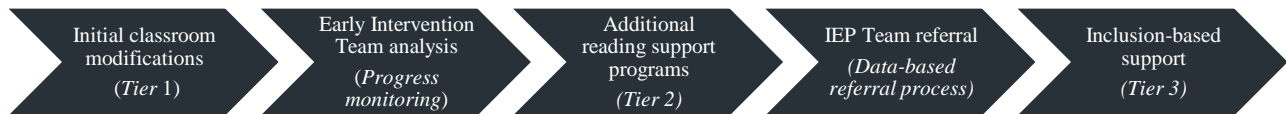
Percent of students in self-contained settings

| | |
|------------------|-------------|
| St. Cloud | 1.4% |
| Rochester | 1.4% |
| Grand Rapids | 1.8% |
| Mankato | 2.2% |
| North St. Paul | 2.6% |
| Duluth | 2.9% |

Inclusion paired with the district’s Integrated Service Delivery Model can be a successful approach to closing the achievement gap and promoting positive social environments.

The district has recently articulated an Integrated Service Delivery Model that “connects general, supplemental, and special education through scientifically based practices, common measures, and explicit decision making procedures driven by child outcomes.”¹

Integrated Service Delivery Model



Buy-in and support for this model is already high amongst central office staff and school based staff, which can be leveraged to build greater consistency in implementation and inclusion across the district.

¹ St. Cloud Area Schools description

- All surveyed principals and assistant principals, and the vast majority of staff serving on IEP teams, responded that *meaningful participation* in general education is beneficial to students with mild to moderate disabilities.
- Almost three-quarters of principals see the Integrated Service Delivery Model as an effective methodology for inclusion of students with IEPs in general education.
- Nine out of ten parents surveyed say that their child is accepted within the school community.

4. The district offers highly regarded in-house support for students with special needs, especially severe needs, thereby lowering the number of students it must serve out of district.

Parents, teachers, and administrators have high regard for the district’s programs to serve students with significant special needs. They shared that such programs were of high quality and provided much needed services. The programs allow students to interact with their peers, remain in their community, and are very cost effective.

St Cloud sends 51 students (less than 0.5% of its total enrollment) to out of district placements. This low rate of out of district placements allows the district to spend 25% less on tuition and transportation for such placements than the five comparative districts.

Though St. Cloud does serve a high number of students with special needs in the district, the percentage of students in separate facilities² is similar to that of like urban districts in Minnesota, such as Duluth, North St. Paul, and Mankato.

Percent of students served in separate facilities

| | |
|------------------|-------------|
| St. Cloud | 1.2% |
| Grand Rapids | 0.2% |
| Rochester | 0.5% |
| Duluth | 1.1% |
| North St. Paul | 1.3% |
| Mankato | 1.6% |

² Separate facilities include: public separate facilities, home placements and hospital care

5. The district has had a high percentage of students with IEPs successfully graduate from high school.

In interviews and school visits, staff articulated high expectations for the achievement of all students, including students with disabilities. These high expectations are evidenced in the higher than average graduation rate of students with disabilities. St. Cloud has a graduation rate of 90.5% (SY 08-09) of all students with IEPs. This is 4 percentage points higher than the state average and higher than most like districts. Such an outcome speaks to the persistence, continuity and consistency of teachers and staff in the district.

Percent of students with IEPs graduating³

| | |
|----------------------------------|--------------|
| St. Cloud | 90.5% |
| <i>Average of like districts</i> | <i>86.5%</i> |
| | |
| Duluth | 80.0% |
| Grand Rapids | 95.8% |
| Rochester | 88.0% |
| Mankato | 86.5% |
| North St. Paul | 82.4% |

6. The district provides comprehensive transition programming for students with disabilities between the ages of 18-21.

In interviews, staff conveyed the importance of ensuring that students with disabilities are prepared to succeed after high school. St. Cloud has developed transition programs, such as CO2 and City Life, to help develop strong job skills for students after high school. Site visits revealed leading practices such as integration with local college campuses and supporting students pursue post-secondary education. In these programs, students receive training to increase awareness of their strengths and limitations, and to attain skills in self-advocacy. Students were seen successfully preparing and serving food and ringing-up customers at the college cafeteria. Many school systems have very little post-secondary transitioning for students with disabilities.

³ Minnesota uses the NCES Emulated Cohort formula to compute this rate: number of completers year 4 divided by the number of dropouts (Grade 9 year 1 + Grade 10 year 2 + Grade 11 year 3 + Grade 12 year 4) + completers year

Opportunities

1. Re-evaluate the allocation of special education teachers to provide more tailored support for students who struggle and to better align with the Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM).

St. Cloud has done well to focus on inclusionary practices for students with special needs. Classroom observations, interviews and surveys revealed that the district is also committed to ensuring compliance and additional specialized support for those students. The ISDM was developed to coordinate and streamline supports for students to promote inclusion, core instruction and differentiation. Concurrent with the Integrated Service Delivery Model, however, the district continues to provide support in the form of push-in, pull-out and co-teaching. The confluence of these strategies has led to high number of special education teachers compared to like districts.

Comparison of special education teachers (Updated to 2010-2011)

Special education teachers (per 1,000 students)⁴

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------|
| St. Cloud | 13 |
| <i>Average of like districts</i> | <i>10</i> |
| | |
| Duluth | 13 |
| Mankato | 11 |
| Grand rapids | 10 |
| North St. Paul | 8 |
| Rochester | 8 |

- St. Cloud has nearly 30% more teachers than like districts in Minnesota.

Special education teachers in the district provide support within schools and within separate in-district facilities such as Riverwoods or other day treatment centers.

⁴ Per 1,000 public AND non-public students

Current allocation of special education teachers

| Placement | Number of teachers | Percentage of total special education teachers |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Co-teaching | 70 | 43% |
| Separate facilities | 36 | 22% |
| Other support | 31 | 19% |
| Setting 4 | 25 | 16% |
| Total | 162 | 100% |

- 43% of special education teachers are involved in co-teaching.

1a. Assess the co-teaching model given the district’s commitment to ISDM.

The ISDM is a comprehensive model that sequentially connects multiple strategies to support struggling students focused around increased core instruction. Prior to the adoption of this model, St. Cloud had implemented co-teaching in many classrooms across the district. The model pairs a general education teacher with a special education teacher, often in reading or math classes. Co-teaching has become one of many strategies to promote inclusion, however, is not directly connected to the ISDM model. Based on our interviews, there is a great deal of support for the co-teaching model. Teachers, principals and central staff, however, questioned the effectiveness of the model as it is used today.

| Benefits of co-teaching | Drawbacks of co-teaching |
|--|---|
| <p><i>Special educators can form deep connections with a small number of students</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In St. Cloud, special education teachers often have caseloads of 10-12 students in pull-out or push-in settings allowing deep connections. | <p><i>Co-teaching does not provide extra time on task</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students in a co-taught classroom do not typically receive extra time to learn. Rather, a co-teaching model provides extra instructors for the same amount of time. |

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Special education co-teachers often have expertise in pedagogy

- Special education co-teachers are often well-trained in designing accommodations to help each student learn. They can provide this expertise to their general education counterpart.

Special education co-teachers can help ensure compliance

- Because of their role in drafting IEPs, co-teachers can help ensure that the IEP is followed.

Instructional time is sustained because students are not leaving the classroom for “special help”

- Special education teachers can provide differentiated instruction within the classroom for all students who struggle without isolating students with IEPs.

Allows the special education teacher to know and to learn the core curriculum

- Because special education teachers spend most of their time in general education classrooms, co-teaching ensures that there is consistency in curriculum across general and special education teachers.

Co-teaching does not provide extra help from content expert teachers.

- Interviews suggested that many co-teachers do not have content expertise in reading or math, which will likely make it difficult to support struggling students.
- At the elementary level, though the content is more basic, the teaching of reading is in fact a highly specialized skill that requires extensive training. Interviews suggested that special education co-teachers do not all have extensive training in the teaching of reading.

Co-teaching limits the number of students to whom the school district can provide extra support.

- Because they are working within the confines of a master schedule and there are typically only a few students with disabilities in a given classroom, co-teachers can only provide support to a limited number of students. Other service delivery models allow more struggling students.

Co-teaching is difficult to implement well and requires many pieces to fall in place, including:

- Common planning time
- Content expertise
- A choice to work together
- A natural ‘chemistry’ in the classroom
- Intentional incorporation of the special education teacher into the instruction (i.e., not using the special education teacher as an aide)

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When done well co-teaching can be very effective, but it is very hard to do well consistently. This is especially problematic because co-teaching is expensive, even when compared to other intensive interventions.

- National research indicates that co-teaching seldom raises student achievement. In his 2009 review of educational research, John Hattie, notes that no studies have shown student gains from co-teaching and that on average it actually produced less learning than a class with a single teacher.
- Interviews with hundreds of staff across the country who co-teach often emphasize the limited content expertise of the special education teachers (“they don’t know the material any better than the kids”) and the lack of respect for special educators from general educators (“they treat me like an overpaid paraprofessional”). In St. Cloud, several teachers suggested special education teachers should be in the classroom so they can learn the content, as a method of professional development.
- Teachers expressed not having sufficient time to meet and plan lessons in their teams. Since many pairs have been together less than a year, they have a difficult time operating as one team in the classroom. Providing common planning time typically increases staffing requirements by 20% or more.
- In interviews, some special education teachers mentioned that, when in a co-teaching setting, they are used as a paraprofessional rather than a true co-teacher. During one classroom observation, the special education teacher was working only with one student for the majority of the class.

The high degree of variation in the co-teaching model has been challenging the district for a number of years. The central question is: what is the most instructionally effective and cost effective use of resources to raise the academic achievement of students who struggle. The district is currently implementing an alternative model to the co-teaching model which fully embraces inclusion and, if done more broadly, could free up additional resources for redeployment.

1b. Consider refocusing resources on an Integrated Service Delivery Model that provides more time with core instruction.

Scaling the ISDM model could mean providing opportunities for all students who struggle, for example, with targeted interventions in an extra period (over 55 minutes in some schools) in the subject in which they are struggling. Students could be identified for enrollment in this extra period through formative assessments, and exited from it as soon as an acceptable level of proficiency in the targeted area is reached.

The period could be taught by a teacher with deep content expertise in the subject matter. If the teacher delivering instruction were a general educator, special educators could act as coaches to the

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general education teachers, rather than co-teachers, and could manage students' IEPs. This model would provide over 165 hours per year of additional core instructional time for struggling students, and increase the likelihood that the extra time is taught by a teacher with deep expertise in the content while still being differentiated based on students' needs.

Financial implications

Currently, many teachers complain about high class sizes with limited support. Class sizes of 33-35 are not uncommon in the district, thereby increasing the difficulty of the teacher to provide targeted and differentiated support to all students. By scaling the Integrated Service Delivery Model, the district can focus resources on supporting all students who are struggling.

St. Cloud Area School District currently spends approximately \$8.5 million⁵ in supporting struggling students with mild to moderate disabilities. Repurposing these resources into integrated models of student support can provide increased time on task for all students who struggle, reduce class sizes and provide more targeted resources and accommodations.

Strategy 1: Increased time on task

- Providing every student with mild/moderate disabilities⁶ with a second period in a core subject would cost the district approximately \$1.5 million and provide double the time they currently receive in core instruction. This assumes the supplemental class has a decreased class size of 15, nearly half of the observed class sizes in the district.
- Providing up to 1,500 students without IEPs who struggle in a core subject a second period of core instruction, at a class size of 15, would cost approximately \$1.5 million. Struggling students would now receive extra instruction in smaller classes and would receive double the content instruction.

Strategy 2: Smaller class sizes

- If the district were to reduce the currently co-taught classes of 30+ classes⁷ by a third, creating smaller classes of 1 teacher to 20 students, the cost would be approximately \$2.6 million.
- Decreasing the class sizes of the second period of core instruction would provide increased opportunity for a content expert teacher to identify areas of difficulty and tailor differentiated strategies to each student.

⁵ 100 Special education teachers and approximately 70 paraprofessionals used in in-class support, pull-out and co-teaching. This figure does not take into account reimbursable expenses of special education staff. However, the suggested strategies recommend about \$3M in non-reimbursement eligible staff dollars.

⁶ Approximately 1400 students with an average class size of 15 with an assumption that every teacher can teach 5 classes.

⁷ Reference is the approximate number of co-teaching classes of 30+ students

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Strategy 3: Targeted Support

- The district serves a large percentage of students with emotional and behavioral needs. If the district were to hire 5 additional behaviorists to provide teachers with actionable strategies to support students, the cost to the district would be approximately \$375,000.

Implementing all three of these integrated support strategies at once would cost the district less than \$6 million and provide nearly 3,000 students with double the time on task with core instruction, lower class sizes for teachers to more easily differentiate instruction and support all students in the classroom and provide increased behavior intervention support. The district would realize a savings of over \$2.5 million to redeploy in other supports.

1c. Evaluate the special education teachers in setting 3 classes by considering investing further in expert behaviorists to support teachers.

Building administrators and teachers identified behavior issues as a key concern. Setting 3 classrooms in the districts are primarily composed of students with emotional disabilities.

- Many students in St. Cloud are being referred to special education by teachers and others who want to get them help.
- The district is identifying students with emotional disabilities at two times the state rate and four times the national rate.

Comparison of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities

| | District⁸ | State | Difference |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Identification rate | 4.2% | 2.0% | 2.2% |
| Number of special education students | 387 | 185 | 202 |

Many districts have found significant benefits from a small team of expert, centrally-deployed behaviorists. These individuals can function like a behavior “SWAT” team, responding to principal and teacher calls and providing advice and interventions. The behaviorists can come to observe a student, articulate what triggers lead to disruptive behavior, and coach the teacher and student in relatively short order. This is a focused support to build the skills and capacity of the teacher. It often pays for itself very quickly when a district ensures that behaviorists are highly skilled.

⁸ St. Cloud reported, Public grades only

Financial implications

By employing expert behaviorists, St. Cloud has an opportunity to decrease the identification rate of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities by generating greater support through in-class intervention. If the district had an identification rate of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities at a level typical of the state, there would be significant benefit to students as well as to the budget.

| | |
|---|--------------------|
| Additional students | 202 |
| Additional cost per student (estimate) | \$8,000 |
| Funds available for behaviorists or other redeployment | \$1,600,000 |

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2. Analyze the role and scheduling of paraprofessionals to increase student independence, socialization and access to content-expert instruction.

Paraprofessionals in St. Cloud play an important role in helping many students with disabilities access the general education curriculum and participate in the general education classroom. Few issues in special education, however, create a larger divergence of views. Years of academic research and results from best practice school districts indicate that too much paraprofessional support can be harmful to student achievement, independence, and socialization. The challenge is to find the right balance.

Paraprofessional staffing level comparison

| | Paraprofessionals (per 1,000 students) | Comparison |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| District ⁹ | 17.7 | |
| Like community ¹⁰ | 6.8 | 2.6x like community average |
| State | 12.1 | 1.5x state average |
| Nation | 7.4 | 2.4x national average |

- St. Cloud has a greater number of paraprofessionals than like districts as well as compared to the state and nation.
- In the past three years, St. Cloud has also seen a 24% increase in paraprofessionals (from 197 FTE to 244 FTE).¹¹

Though the district has a strong commitment to paraprofessional support for struggling students, interviews and site visits reveal challenges with assignments and scheduling of paraprofessionals, which limit the overall support of and effectiveness on student outcomes, including:

- Paraprofessionals are often pulled from class for other duties, eliminating extra support at times.
- More than half of the support for students with mild to moderate special needs comes from paraprofessionals. This is not consistent with best practice or the inclusionary model.
- When a paraprofessional is needed, the default in the district is to provide one paraprofessional per student for five days a week.
- If a student in a classroom needs paraprofessional support, no mechanism exists to share an aide that is already in the classroom. Administrators report that some classes have 2, 3, even 4 adults helping just because each decision was made independently. Scheduling more efficiently could allow fewer aides to help *more* children.

⁹ St. Cloud reported data = 237.24 FTE special education paraprofessionals, out of St Cloud reported 13,381 total public and non-public enrollment.

¹⁰ Like community nationwide includes high poverty and medium spending districts.

¹¹ Data includes behavior interventionists, provided by St. Cloud Area School District (Sheet 11 -Financial Trends).

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2a. Create clear criteria for when a student or a classroom is assigned a paraprofessional and for when support can be weaned off to foster greater independence.

The use of paraprofessionals for inclusion remains very popular with teachers, parents and principals. Research has shown that the presence of a paraprofessional can reduce the student’s contact with the certified teacher and prevents friendships from forming with classmates. Although well-intentioned, this level of support may undermine the positive benefits of inclusion to promote independence and develop greater peer-based support networks.

The district has a commitment to support students with special needs through multiple models including co-teaching, setting 3, pull-out and push-in assistance. As such, the district has a high number of special education teachers than comparative districts nationwide. In addition to these models, classes with students with special needs are typically provided with paraprofessional assistance. Some classrooms visited had two or even three paraprofessionals because IEPs do not consider whether a support-based adult already works in that classroom. Also, highly trained student-teachers do not count as support under many IEPs thereby creating classrooms with three or more adults providing support.

The district has already done considerable work in transitioning paraprofessionals from serving one student to at least two or more students and there is an opportunity to further reassess the current criteria to assign paraprofessionals by considering other already present support.

Paraprofessionals by role

| | FTE | Percent FTE of total | Total cost |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| Special Education pupil support | 64 | 22% | \$1,362,899 |
| Special education program support | 175 | 60% | \$3,683,062 |
| Non-special education support | 51 | 18% | \$1,094,727 |
| Total | 290 | 100% | \$6,000,000 |

In addition, paraprofessionals in the district receive very little training, but they often become the primary instructor for a student and nearly always become the primary intervention effort in a classroom. Often a paraprofessional cannot address the underlying academic issue such as struggling to read or learn math. A process to clearly articulate the student’s needs, what is expected of the paraprofessional and when, and a thoughtful review to determine if an aide can address the shortcoming will increase student learning and decrease costs.

- Almost two-thirds of principals surveyed believe the district does not have clear guidelines for when a paraprofessional is no longer warranted.

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- Additionally, over half of principals surveyed feel pressured to provide a paraprofessional, even when they do not believe one is warranted.

Assigning paraprofessionals for partial day or week support and providing more reading teachers or behaviorists may better address students’ underlying issues.

Sample system for paraprofessional assignments

| Type of student need | Non-paraprofessional support | Shared or partial time paraprofessional support | Paraprofessional role and responsibility |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|
| Academic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading teacher support • Accommodations by general education • Special education teacher instruction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seldom appropriate • If assigned, should only be for targeted subjects, not full-day • Not during related services or pull-out | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If assigned, should provide additional learning opportunities not replacement learning |
| Behavior | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations by general education • Behaviorist support • Sensory diet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be short-term support with clear progress monitoring | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If assigned, should provide additional learning opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Prompt appropriate behavior / work completion, etc. ○ Run behavioral systems |
| Health / physical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations by general education • Special education teacher support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared paraprofessional support may be necessary • Consider specific times of need (ex. transitions) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist the student in learning systems or using tools that allow for optimal participation in the school environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Schedules and prompts ○ Modeling peers |
| High need | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accommodations by general education • Special education teacher support • Behaviorist support • Sensory diet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign paraprofessional support by class not by student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the student in interacting effectively with the environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interpret environmental / educational expectations |

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Financial implication

Nationally, there is an average of less than 1 special education paraprofessional for each special education teacher (.86 FTE). St. Cloud Area School District has 1.5 special education paraprofessionals to each special educator.¹² This is in addition to a higher than average proportion of special educators to students. Rethinking the criteria of assigning paraprofessionals to students and classrooms can focus declining resources on targeted support models with research-based evidence.

By shifting to a rate of paraprofessionals per students closer to the state average, the district can realize up to \$1.3 million in additional resources.

Comparison of paraprofessionals

| | District | State | Difference |
|--|--------------------|-------|------------|
| Paraprofessionals per 1,000 students | 17.7 | 12.1 | 5.6 |
| Above average paraprofessionals in St. Cloud | 75 | | |
| Additional cost per paraprofessional | \$17,000 | | |
| Available for redeployment | \$1,300,000 | | |

2b. Reassess the need for paraprofessional support in secondary levels

As young students age, a paraprofessional often remains through middle school and high school. This creates a dependency that can harm the student after graduation. Some students do benefit from having a paraprofessional, but the district has more than four times as many paraprofessionals as similar best practice districts. Reducing the reliance on paraprofessionals for students, especially in the secondary grades, will help increase students’ independence.

Paraprofessional breakdown by level¹³

| | FTE/ grade | Total cost |
|------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Elementary | 22 | \$2,836,447 |
| Junior High | 14 | \$842,355 |
| Senior High | 15 | \$1,185,358 |
| Totals by level | 240 | \$4,864,161 |

¹² Does not include Social Workers, Psychologists, OT, PT and Speech and Language Therapists

¹³ Does not include preschool paraprofessionals but does include ALC paraprofessionals

The number of paraprofessionals at the high school level increases from the junior high school level. National best practices typically show a 50% - 90% reduction in paraprofessionals at the high school level. In addition, nearly 30%¹⁴ of senior high aides are assigned directly to students.

Promoting independence is especially critical in the senior high grades to promote success beyond high school. In order to support students develop greater independence requires a careful fading of paraprofessional support from the classroom, which starts with clear exit guidelines for such support.

2c. Create an infrastructure to increase the effectiveness of paraprofessionals

The district has made a very large investment in special education paraprofessionals, with 288 FTE at a total cost of over \$6 million. Despite the large numbers, these staff members receive little training, infrequent professional development, and limited oversight. No system is in place to remove an ineffective paraprofessional. If paraprofessionals were part of a formal structure, they would be more productive, better scheduled, and have a greater impact on student achievement.

Technically speaking, the classroom teacher directs and supervises the paraprofessionals in their class. Our research indicates that few classroom teachers feel comfortable or empowered in this role. Paraprofessionals that are not able to perform the tasks required are often transferred to another school or assigned general building support tasks.

St. Cloud Area School district has in place a formal evaluation system for every employee. The next step would be to link evaluations to professional development opportunities. In addition, administrators and supervisors could augment evaluations with input from the teachers who direct (and observe) the paraprofessionals' daily work. According to those who work extensively with teachers and paraprofessionals, this arrangement can reinforce teamwork and preserves collegiality among teachers and support staff. Best practices emphasize the importance of evaluating all staff on how well they perform their assigned duties, and, if improvement is prescribed, they provide access to the appropriate in-service programs.

¹⁴ Alternative was divided 2/3 into high school

3. Reconsider the role of the special education supervisor and principals to provide greater unity of general education and special education practices in the building, improve processes, and reduce tensions.

St. Cloud’s commitment to supporting special education teachers and staff can be seen through the unique establishment of the special education supervisor role. Currently, the district has 4.75 FTE dedicated in this role. These administrators oversee the special education programs and can be resources to the principal as well as to teachers and other staff.

Special education supervisors were initially envisioned to be a collaborative and guiding role for special education at the building-level. They have the potential for a broad impact at the school and district levels in terms of understanding what needs to be done to better support students. Interviews reveal that these positions have resulted in an increased separation of general education and special education at the building level as some principals leave all of the special education decisions up to the special education supervisor, frustrating both special education supervisors and teachers and moving away from the original intent of the position.

Many teachers, principals, and supervisors themselves expressed frustration with the current role and responsibilities, and expressed the need for district leadership to provide more role clarification in order to allow supervisors to better support principals. For example, some special education supervisors say they become “special education sheriffs” focused on patrolling and ensuring compliance rather than providing instructional guidance or strengthening the implementation of district practices. Surveys of principals and staff highlight the sometimes ambiguous role of the special education supervisor, and their relationship to the principal: “look at the effectiveness of Special Education Supervisors... Would it not be appropriate for the Assistant Director of Special Education to be the “go-to” person?”

Supervisors are eager to work collaboratively with principals and to support them in identifying and understanding the needs of the students at their particular school, and how to best serve those needs. They note that a clear, district provided, role definition would allow a better understanding of the responsibilities of both the supervisor and the principal, and would facilitate the supervisors in supporting principals.

3.1 Conduct a needs assessment on special education supports at the school and district level.

Supervisors are proud of the work they do, and enjoy working collaboratively with principals and other school staff. However, the district has implemented a number of new programs, support models and staff since the establishment of the supervisor role. Special education practices have and continue to be redefined by the district and the associated role of the supervisor has continuously adapted to keep pace with the changes. While the special education support models have been clearly articulated, the changed roles have not. Conducting a needs analysis of the schools will provide greater clarity into the nature of supervisory support that may be necessary.

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- *Step 1: What do the schools need?*

The first step is to understand the current level of support, training and guidance being provided at the school level and to compare it with the desired situation. This analysis should reveal areas where not enough support is available, areas where support may be misallocated or two or more positions are doing the same activity. This analysis will also reveal the potential needs based on impending changes in programs or staffing.

- *Step 2: How can we fill those needs?*

The first step will reveal a number of opportunities – the second step is determining who is best equipped and best suited to fill that need? For example, special education supervisors currently monitor and evaluate related service professionals, but school-based leadership monitor and evaluate paraprofessionals. Both of these resources would ideally be coordinated to schedule and provide the right mix of support for a student. When supervision and coordination of these roles reside in different people, such coordination becomes more difficult to achieve.

- *Step 3: Reorganization and training*

Once accountability to provide the needs at the schools is established, the district may need to help implement the changed roles by providing training on new roles and responsibilities.

3.2 Rethink the role of the special education supervisor to better align with school and district needs.

Supervisors enjoy the collaborative nature of their work, and are dedicated to ensuring positive outcomes for all students. While there are many aspects of this role that are currently working, such as the cross-district teams they facilitate to evaluate program effectiveness, there are some aspects of the position that they find frustrating, as well. Articulating how the hope for this position relates to both the building needs of the position and the supervisor's perception of their own position will help the district determine how, if at all, the position should be re-defined.

Initial vision for the role, and current frustrations with the role:

| Role | Initial vision of the role | Principal Perception | Special Education Supervisor Perception |
|---|--|--|---|
| Resource for special education in the building | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help implement special education models in buildings • Provide guidance to special education staff as necessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors take ownership of special education teachers since teachers are accountable to them | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are too busy putting out fires to focus on preventing them • Focused too much on compliance issues in buildings |
| Lead special education vision throughout district increasing consistency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead school-level trainings on: special education vision, integrated service delivery models, RTI, PBIS, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High turnover in special education supervisors does not allow for high level of collaboration between supervisors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel that principals are not always leading special education practices in their building. Supervisors take on the day-to-day special education management without time to engage in other activities |
| Serve as a partner to the building administration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridge communication gap between general education and special education • Provide building administration with best practices in paraprofessional use and scheduling, inclusion models and student support practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varies by building – some principals have strong special education background • Supervisors are not consistently seen as partners to principals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers can complain to principals and principal will make change without consulting supervisor • Want to partner with principals to provide program and staff development • Often seen as a support role or “under” the principal which prevents true partnership |
| Monitoring programs and staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct evaluations of specific Special Education roles • Create/lead cross-district teams to evaluate program effectiveness • Develop recommendations to improve special education practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisors evaluate the related service professionals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each supervisor is assigned a certain number of sites – but the focus is not always on evaluation but day-to-day support. |

There are a number of options for rethinking the supervisor role for special education to ensure a high degree of compliance, operational effectiveness, and collaboration between building administration. Supervisors also note the benefit of having a special education supervisor become a

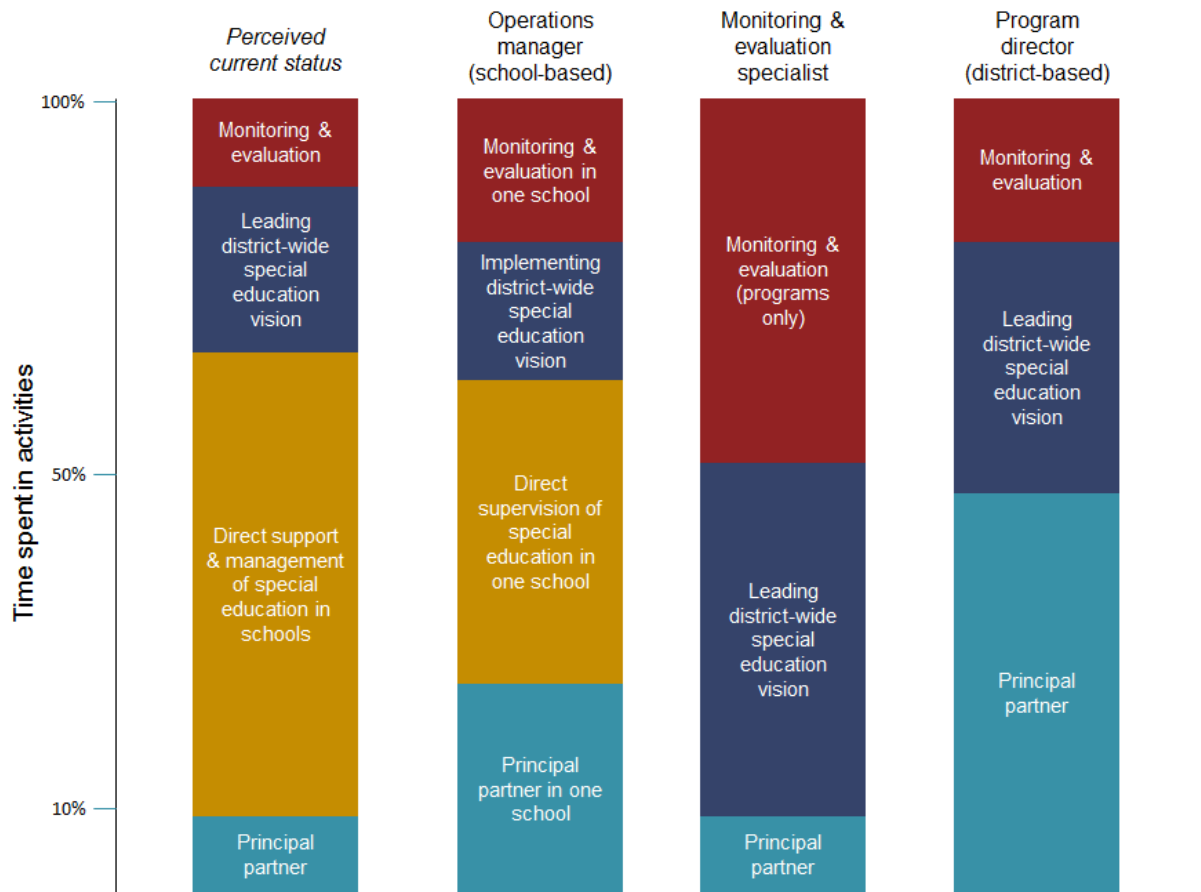
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principal, since that principal will be better equipped to help all students in his/her building succeed academically. There are multiple options for the role the special education supervisor could play:

- **Operations manager (school-based)**: If the needs assessment reveals need for direct support and management of special education in schools, the role can be shifted to a special education department head/lead teacher in a building. These positions already have a working relationship with the principal and a day-to-day presence within the building to assess changing needs. As well, these positions generally experience less turnover, thus providing more stability within the building. It may be necessary to reduce this individual's teaching load to ensure that he or she has sufficient time to provide the necessary support. Absorbing this role can make available over \$300,000 in resources to reallocate.
- **Monitoring & evaluation specialists**: Understanding the effectiveness of special education supports is tantamount to being able to provide the best support for students. If the needs assessment reveals that the district needs support in assessing the effectiveness of new programs as a primary need, special education supervisors can play the lead in designing and conducting program evaluations. The district will then be able to measure its return on investment – or how well new programs are performing based on expectations. This requires all programs, efforts, and strategies be formally evaluated by multiple measures, including impact on student learning, number of students served, and cost per student.
- **Program directors (district-level)**: By centralizing the responsibility of implementing the special education vision throughout the district, supervisors can reshape their role to focus on providing direction and guidance to principals and thereby ensure greater consistency in practices. Supervisors could each tie to specific initiatives or programs instead of sites, thus enabling them to provide tailored trainings and embed systems to promote common practices.

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Potential responsibilities and time allocation of special education supervisor



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4. Integrate instructional support models and resources.

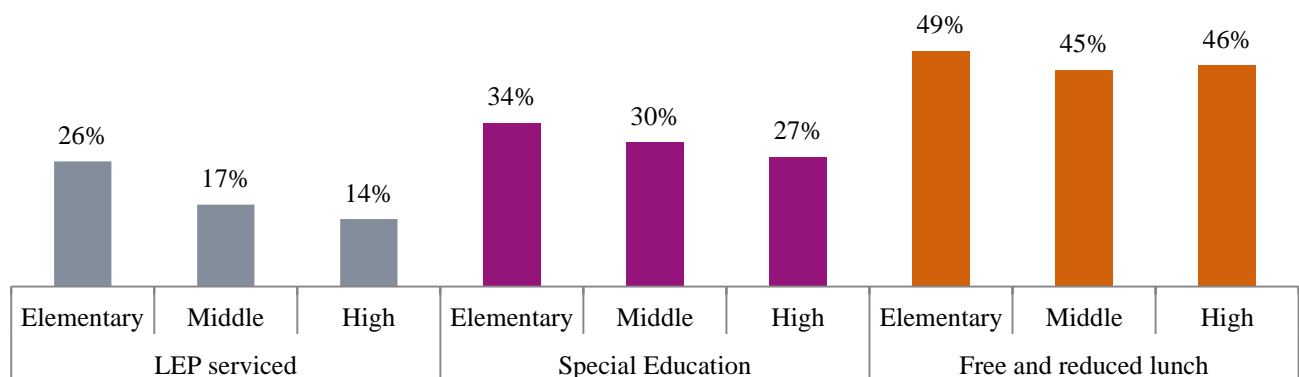
The district currently has many support programs and is trying new programs to help improve remediation and intervention. Programs are highly separated between special education efforts and others (by student group or general education). Intentionally combining resources and decision-making between support providers can lead to a greater continuum of supports and increased knowledge of how to most effectively support all students who are struggling.

4a. Increase resources for all struggling students by merging remediation efforts across the district.

The Department of Student Services has an opportunity to provide additional support to students with similar needs instead of by demographic or socio-economic background. Interviews with elementary teachers who do not use Read180 emphasized the variety of options available for struggling students, and the lack of consistency with which the options are used depending on the student. Often students with limited English proficiency, learning disabled students and struggling readers from low income backgrounds need the same resource – more time with the core content instruction. By pooling funds available to these groups, the offerings can be consistent across student groups.

Reading achievement in these groups is significantly lower than their peers and gets progressively lower in the junior high and high school levels.

Reading Student Achievement (% Proficient and Advanced) by group and level



By viewing the available resources as one fund for remediation and intervention, the available support for programs in St. Cloud is significant. The district was able to pool funds to purchase and implement Read 180 to support all secondary students in a cohesive manner. Interviews with secondary principals and teachers consistently highlight the positive effect the Read180 collaboration has had on students' learning, as well as the increased collaboration amongst staff.

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Remediation and intervention funds

| Program | Target population | 2010-2011 Spending | Total FTE |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Title 1 | Low income students | \$1,567,984 | 23 |
| ESL | Limited English proficient students | \$2,051,597 | 30 |
| Special Education ¹⁵ | Special Education | \$362,617 | 4.2 |
| Integration ¹⁶ | Students from other cultural backgrounds | \$1,361,650 | 26.5 |
| Total potential funds | All students | \$5,343,848 | 62.2 |

Combining dollars and staffing allows St. Cloud to offer more comprehensive and consistent intervention support across the district and helps to remove barriers between students and staff from different program areas. Merging funds will ensure greater collaboration and coordination of programming at the central office as well as at the school level.

4b. Increase collaboration to move implementation of RTI from conceptual understanding into clear and consistent guidelines and practices for teachers to use in their classrooms.

The district has done considerable work in combining RTI practices within the Integrated Service Delivery Model. There is already widespread buy-in on this model to support greater inclusion for students with IEP. Currently, RTI is best understood by special education teachers and supervisors but interviews suggest that general education teachers struggle to identify intervention strategies, progress monitoring protocols and alignment with the ISDM.

The district can take the next step in implementing RTI by creating an RTI leadership team comprised of teachers of students with limited English proficiency, counselors, special educators, general educators, and related service professionals. Often times the special education supervisor leads this effort in the building, but RTI should be based in the general education classroom and therefore led by the principal and general education curriculum leadership. The district can build on the existing early intervention team to be this leadership team with greater participation of general education educators. This team can develop action plans of RTI in their building tailored to needs of the students and the capacity in the buildings. These in-school teams can tailor best practice action plans within their building’s context by assigning responsibility, determining timelines and arranging follow-ups.

¹⁵ Special education funds only include early intervention and RTI funds. Additional funds can be sourced through an in-depth analysis of special education programming.

¹⁶ Integration funds may be used to support academics of students of color and refugees who struggle.

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