



Special Education

January 26.2026



EVANSTON/SKOKIE
SCHOOL DISTRICT 65

Every Child, Every Day, Whatever it Takes



Special Education Audit

Gini Sulek Director of Student Specialized Services



- Director of Special Education (24 Years) with prior experience as a Special Education Teacher and School Psychologist
- PreK–Grade 8 System Leadership overseeing the full continuum of services, including MTSS
- Student-Centered, Data-Informed Leadership guiding program design, compliance, and resource allocation
- Capacity Building Across Schools to strengthen inclusive practices and instructional leadership
- Strong Family & Community Partnerships grounded in transparency and collaboration
- Commitment to Equity & Inclusion ensuring access, belonging, and success for all students



Department Focus



Focus resources and align systems to improve student outcomes, control long-term costs, and sustain inclusive practices, while keeping IEP-driven decision-making central.

Collaboration/Partners



Community

- ❖ CCDI
- ❖ CASE
- ❖ Moran Center

Union

- ❖ Joint Committee of Special Education and Inclusion
- ❖ DEC Exec/Supt
- ❖ ETAA Negotiations

Board of Education

- ❖ School Board Liaison

School-Based

- ❖ RSP Team Leads
- ❖ Traveling Specialists
- ❖ IES Coordinators
- ❖ Legal
- ❖ Building Level



- Why the Audit Was Conducted:
 - West Ed conducted an audit in 2020.
 - Evaluate effectiveness of special education services for students with IEPs
 - Assess efficiency and use of resources across the district
- How the Audit Was Conducted:
 - Review of district policies, procedures, fiscal records, and service delivery systems
 - Analysis of district data, including staffing, transportation, placements, MOE, staff survey results, and student outcomes
 - Engagement with district leadership through interviews to understand current practices and operations
- What the Audit Examined:
 - Legal compliance and IEP implementation
 - Staffing models and service delivery
 - Continuum of services
 - Fiscal sustainability and MOE

Maintenance of Effort



Maintenance of Effort (MOE) is a federal rule connected to special education funding.

- It means that school districts must continue spending a consistent level of state and/or local funds on special education each year.
- Federal special education funds are meant to add support, not replace local funding.
- LEAs are required to budget and spend at least as much as they did in the most recent year they met MOE requirements, which sets the MOE threshold.
- Each year, the district must meet or exceed that level to stay compliant.
- MOE can only be reduced in limited situations allowed under federal law.
- If MOE is not met, the district may lose eligibility for federal special education funds.

Overall Conclusions



District 65's special education program is legally compliant and strongly inclusion-focused, but rising costs, uneven systems, and stagnant student outcomes require strategic refinement to ensure long-term sustainability and improved results.

The recommendations that follow look to strengthen processes that are aligned with the Special Education and IEP processes already in place, as established by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Recommendations



Improve Student Outcomes Through Data Use

- Conduct regular, structured reviews of student progress, instructional practices, and achievement gaps.
- Focus on improving access to grade-level instruction, specially designed instruction, and progress monitoring.
- Use outcome data to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive practices in supporting students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Improve Consistency and Effectiveness of MTSS

- Conduct a districtwide MTSS self-assessment to identify gaps and inconsistencies across schools.
- Improve alignment in data use, problem-solving practices, instructional approaches, and collaboration.
- Strengthen MTSS as a prevention strategy to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education.

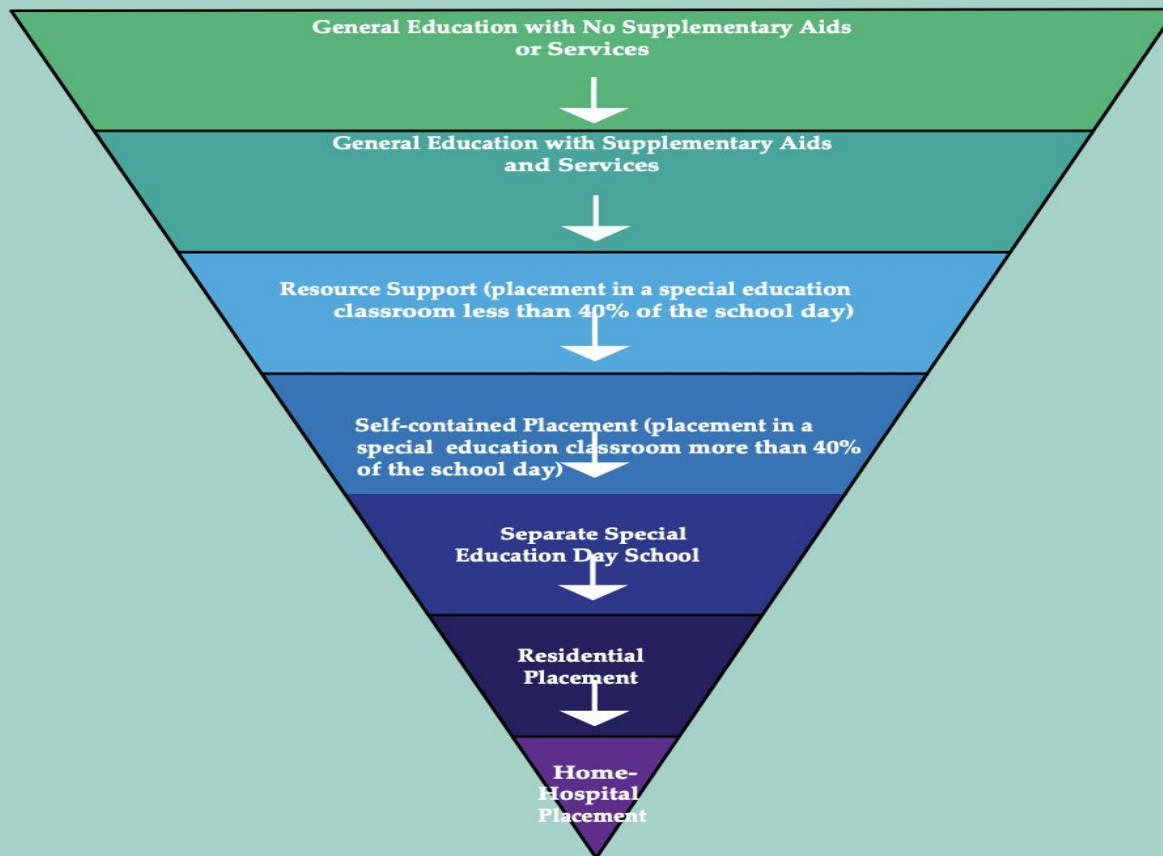
Recommendations



Strengthen the Continuum of Services

- Expand in-district program options to better meet student needs and reduce reliance on costly out-of-district placements.
- Use data-driven pilots when adding or revising programs before making long-term commitments.
- Ensure all decisions remain IEP-driven and aligned with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements.
- A stronger continuum may also reduce transportation and paraprofessional costs over time.

The Placement Continuum



Recommendations



Address Growth in Out-of-District Placements

- Maintain centralized oversight of placements while expanding re-integration supports back into district programs.
- Use placement data to guide program development for students
- Monitor tuition and transportation costs to support budget forecasting and MOE planning.

School Year	Number of Out-of-District Students
2021-2022	60
2022-2023	82
2023-2024	86
2024-2025	82
2025-2026	67

Recommendations



Refine Special Education Staffing Models

- Continue implementing workload-based staffing plans (not just caseload counts) for special educators and related service providers.
- Monitor paraprofessional use more closely, with stronger fading plans and fidelity checks.
- Track contracted services carefully and reduce reliance where possible due to significantly higher costs than in-house staff.

Recommendations



Control Rising Special Education Transportation Costs

- Develop clearer decision-making guidance for when special education transportation is required.
- Regularly review transportation data to identify cost drivers and efficiencies.
- Align transportation decisions with broader program and placement strategies.

2020-21	\$1,804,542
2021-22	\$3,498,616
2022-23	\$6,156,658
2023-24	\$7,285,448

Recommendations



Strengthen Fiscal Oversight and MOE Practices

- Strengthen collaborative communication among special education, finance, HR, and MOE reporting staff.
- Establish clear internal procedures for tracking expenditures, monitoring MOE thresholds, and identifying allowable exceptions.
- Use MOE data proactively to inform budget planning and avoid unintended increases in long-term spending obligations.

Maintenance of Effort



Year	State & Local Expenditures	Federal Expenditures	Total Expenditures
2019–20	\$24,661,703	\$2,490,616	\$27,152,319
2020–21	\$26,119,597	\$2,208,316	\$28,327,913
2021–22	\$27,794,821	\$2,303,708	\$30,098,529
2022–23	\$35,156,914	\$2,356,102	\$37,513,016
2023–24	\$45,085,583	\$2,327,613	\$47,413,196

Because MOE is based on the most recent year of compliant spending, the 2023–24 expenditure level establishes the new minimum funding floor for future years, unless a federal exception applies.

Three Year Plan



Area	Success Looks Like	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Improve Student Outcomes Through Data Use	Instruction driven by student outcome data; inclusion measured by growth and performance.	Launch data reviews; expand access to grade-level instruction, Specially Designed Instruction, and progress monitoring.	Use data cycles to adjust instruction and improve fidelity.	Use longitudinal data to show improved outcomes and equity.
Improve Consistency and Effectiveness of MTSS	MTSS is consistent, preventative, and reduces inappropriate special education referrals.	Complete MTSS self-assessment; clarify data use and problem-solving expectations.	Align data use, instruction, problem-solving, and collaboration.	Sustain MTSS to reduce referrals and drive continuous improvement.

Three Year Plan



Area	Success Looks Like	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Strengthen the Continuum of Services	Balanced in-district continuum aligned to IEPs and LRE, reducing out-of-district placements while maintaining outcomes.	Analyze placement, cost, and outcome data; launch targeted, data-driven pilots aligned to IEP and LRE requirements.	Monitor results and costs; expand effective programs and reduce select out-of-district placements.	Embed effective programs; sustain reduced placements and long-term efficiencies.
Address Growth in Out-of-District Placements	Out-of-district placements are strategically managed and reduced through strong programs, reintegration, and fiscal oversight.	Maintain centralized oversight; analyze trends and strengthen reintegration planning.	Use data to guide programs; expand reintegration supports and monitor costs.	Demonstrate reduced reliance; sustain reintegration and long-term fiscal/MOE planning.

Three Year Plan



Area	Success Looks Like	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Refine Special Education Staffing Models	Equitable, sustainable staffing aligned to student needs through workload-based models, appropriate paraprofessional use, and reduced contracted services, while maintaining compliance and service quality.	Implement workload-based staffing; clarify paraprofessional roles and fading; improve tracking of contracted services.	Refine staffing using workload data; strengthen paraprofessional monitoring; reduce contracted services where capacity exists.	Sustain workload-based models; demonstrate appropriate paraprofessional use; achieve reduced reliance on contracted services.

Three Year Plan



Area	Success Looks Like	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Control Rising Special Education Transportation Costs	Transportation decisions are consistent, data-driven, and aligned to IEPs and placement, improving efficiency and cost predictability.	Establish clear transportation guidance; align transportation with placement decisions.	Implement targeted efficiency strategies; strengthen coordination across departments.	Sustain consistent practices; demonstrate cost predictability; integrate transportation into long-term planning.

Three Year Plan



Area	Success Looks Like	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Strengthen Fiscal Oversight and MOE Practices	Fiscal oversight is coordinated, transparent, and proactive—ensuring MOE compliance, informed budget decisions, and avoidance of unintended long-term spending obligations.	Establish cross-department coordination, clear procedures for expenditure tracking, and MOE threshold monitoring.	Use MOE and expenditure data to inform budget development and identify risks earlier.	Sustain proactive MOE monitoring, demonstrate consistent compliance, and use multi-year data to support long-term fiscal planning.

Summary/Conclusion



The district will implement a data-driven, prevention-focused, and fiscally sustainable special education system designed to improve student outcomes, strengthen in-district capacity, reduce reliance on out-of-district placements, and ensure long-term equity, compliance, and cost predictability.

All changes to special education and related services will be made in accordance with the IEP process. Decisions regarding services, programs, and placement will continue to be determined by individual student IEP teams and will inform district wide planning related to staffing, program development, and service delivery to ensure alignment with student needs and legal requirements.