

Special Education District Trends

Findings Report

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Submitted by:

The Special Education Trend Modeling Group

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A. Overview

In order to best plan for future needs and challenges, the district has tasked a number of trend modeling groups with the responsibility of gathering and reviewing trend data in a number of high stakes and high impact areas. As part of this district wide review, a Special Education Trend Modeling Group was formed to handle this task in regards to myriad of variables impacting special education services and resources.

As a practical matter, the data targeted for this review was that most likely to impact district services and resources. In most past reports, these data points reflect funds spent, prevailing student needs, key programmatic and instructional implications, and suggestive practices moving forward. Accordingly, the Group focused its efforts on a review of previously gathered data in these salient trend areas. The data captured was within two recent statewide reports, and two recently completed district specific reports. The review then focused on determining and highlighting both global as well as district specific trends that could be used to inform decisions about the best applications for district resources moving forward.

B. The Data Reports

The four reports reviewed are listed below. Although they were commissioned for a variety of reasons, they all gathered salient data that was used to understand the targeted prevailing trends. Those data points, as a collection of related information, provided varying pieces of an overall Special Education picture. While some of the findings may be more germane to planning at the state level, much of the data was very useful in formulating a sense and understanding of trends at the district level. As a result, our review of this material found that it reflected many areas of presenting need and best practice suggestions for the district moving forward.

It should be noted that findings referenced for the district were drawn primarily from the NESDEC and Walker reports. Data used to reference state comparisons or broader state trends were drawn from the two DESE reports.

1. Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Thomas Hehir, Todd Grindal and Hadas Eidelman, April 2012 (Appendix A)
2. Use of Out-Of-District Programs by Massachusetts Students with Disabilities, Thomas Hehir and Associates, October 2013 (Appendix B)
3. Belmont Public Schools NESDEC (New England School Developmental Council) Trend Report, Independent Commissioned Report, December 2012 (Appendix C)
4. Walker Partnerships Belmont Public Schools Trend Report, Independent Commissioned Report, January 2014 (Appendix D)

C. Global Findings

As noted above, data sources were both state as well as district specific. Presentation of findings cited below is drawn from all data sources and presented as summary findings of trends

with comparisons to Belmont. Where warranted, notations regarding implications for best practices moving forward were also included.

1. Massachusetts has the second highest rate of special education identification in the United States. More than 17% of K through 12th grade students in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are eligible for special education services. This rate of identification for special education service eligibility is the second highest in the country, behind Rhode Island's 19%. In addition, rates of special education identification vary substantially within and between Massachusetts' school districts.

By comparison, Belmont has approximately 9%-10% of its student population identified as eligible for special education, and is relatively consistent in its rate of identification between schools. This rate of identification has remained relatively consistent over the past 2-3 years, although the overall district rate has decreased yearly since 2006. This decrease was in spite of a student population that has increased during that same time frame Belmont's rate of identification is lower than any of the other LABBB collaborative members, although all members are below the state average.

Possible causes for the decrease in identified students might be the increase in early interventions at the elementary level, as well as the increase in the adoption of universally designed instruction and supports across the district. Trend data from state reports indicates these models to be best practice approaches for remediation and instruction, and regulatory changes in the past 8 years have mandated the use of interventions prior to identifying students as having any type of Specific Learning Disability. In response, Belmont has increasingly developed and implemented these models of remediation and instructional design over the same time period, and invested a significant amount of resources into staff development and materials to support these goals. Implications for future practice would be to continue this approach. Resources in staff development and materials supporting these endeavors should be continued.

2. The majority of students with disabilities in Massachusetts, approximately 63 out of every hundred students with disabilities, spend at least 80% of their school day in classrooms with their typically developing peers. This compares favorably with figures for the rest of the country, where approximately 58 out of every hundred students with disabilities are included to this extent. This practice supports increased student gains as state reports found that students with disabilities who spend more time being educated with their typically developing peers, on average, earn higher scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests. State trend reports concluded that interventions in districts should focus on requiring better practices in general education, with best practices widely viewed as those that support maximum use of inclusion, in addition to application of Universal Design principals in instructional design, and adoption of a Response to Intervention (RTI) model in kindergarten through grade three to promote early literacy development.

By comparison, Belmont has approximately 83 out of every hundred students with disabilities included in classrooms with their typically developing peers at least 80% of their school day. Implications for Best Practice are that students should be included in settings with typically developed peers as often as possible. Belmont also has a solidly structured RTI program implemented at the K-4 level, and continues to build capacity and breadth of instructional support for both literacy and Mathematics. Resources in staff development and materials supporting these endeavors should be continued.

3. Out of District (OOD) placements are used by many districts to meet the needs of students whose disabilities present challenges beyond the expertise or program capacities of their home districts. State trend report findings for these placements include the following:

a. There are no observable differences in the academic progress made by out-placed and non-out-placed students, but there is some evidence to indicate that out-placed students do appear to experience improved rates of school attendance.

Implications for practice would be maintenance of Team monitoring to ensure effective student placements. Attendance is often a function of student performance. As a result, this presents as a possible indication of placement success or failure. When Teams reach a point of recommending an OOD placement, student attendance has often declined. The corresponding increase in attendance noted through the findings might be indicative of an appropriate placement. The services provided in the new placement, possibly responsible for the increase in attendance, may also present as an appropriate set of services to possibly employ in-district.

b. Although there were slight year-to-year differences in the percentage of students with disabilities who were placed in out-of-district settings, this rate was relatively stable over time.

Belmont falls in line with this finding having very little fluctuation in the number of students placed out of district from year to year.

c. In general, communities that were wealthier, on average, tended to place students with disabilities in private special education schools at higher rates than less-wealthy communities, after accounting for relevant town-level characteristics. These placements accounted for a significant part of a district's Special Education expenditures. Many similar districts to Belmont expend upwards of 40%-50% of their Special Education budget on OOD placements.

Belmont's trends are consistent with these findings. The district has typically spent approximately 45%-50% of its annual Special Education budget on OOD placements to meet the needs of its students. The number of OOD placements may sometimes be a result of an increased push from parents typically experienced in higher income districts, but more often out placements are made of necessity in order to meet the demands of high need students. While higher percentages of lower income students often reside in larger districts that have more in district programs, communities with higher levels of wealth are often smaller and lacking of these program resources. Many smaller communities without high levels of wealth also fall into this category. State trend reports found that some special education directors

reported that their districts lacked the resources or the number of students to build programs within district to support some students with disabilities, and these were the students whom they placed out-of-district. Belmont's outplacements are primarily due more to this factor than to parent push. In-district resource limitations in space, staff and specialist expertise often make it cost prohibitive to meet the high demands of students with low incidence disabilities, or the high demands of students with extreme challenges.

Implications for best practice moving forward would be to continually monitor aggregate needs to determine any areas for prospective in-district program development. Currently, aggregate areas of need support continued in-district program development to serve students with ASD challenges and students with Socio-Emotional challenges. ASD identification has increased significantly in the past 10 years, and the severity of the Socio-Emotional challenges faced by BPS students, in spite of a decrease in identification rates, has warranted an increase in services to address these challenges.

Implications moving forward would also include fund allocations to support the current and anticipated OOD placement expenses. While the number of OOD students has remained relatively constant, the cost of the placements often rises from year to year. With in-district resource limitations in space and staff remaining constant, it is unlikely that the district would be able to alter its current service model to incorporate more programs internally.

d. Late middle school and early high school are the primary years in which children were first placed in out-of-district programs. Parents and approved private-school administrators noted that beginning in middle school, larger settings, expectations for more independence, and greater academic rigor and accountability were a sudden transition for students accustomed to smaller and more nurturing environments.

Belmont's trends are consistent with these findings, although students are not sent to OOD placements simply as a result of transition or adjustment difficulties. These factors tend to exacerbate already existing disability vulnerabilities subsequently warranting placements that provide more targeted supports.

Implications moving forward would be to continue evaluating all available supports and services so as to ensure a full range and provision of interventions to help students successfully address challenges in-district. Resources in staff development and materials supporting these endeavors, as well as in consulting expertise and expert practitioners, should be continued.

4. A significant amount of financial resources are allocated to district special education expenses in every district, and represent a significant part of each district's budget. State trend reports as well as Belmont's own district trend reports found similar results as well as notable trends. These included the following:

a. In the past three year period, the change (increase) in total district General Education expenditures has been approximately \$4,589,523, or 23.12%. This breaks down to an annual increase of approximately \$1,529,841 or 7.71%.

b. The corresponding change in Special Education funds in the same 3 year time period is \$1,442,046 or 13.93%. This breaks down to an annual increase of approximately \$480,682 or 4.64%.

c. As a subset of this, the change in OOD Placement expenses over the past three years has been approximately \$339,234 or 9.41%. This breaks down to an annual increase of approximately \$113,078 or 3.14%.

d. Special Education Expenses as a percentage of Regular Education Expenses have remained relatively consistent at approximately 34% of the overall district budget.

Belmont's expense trends would indicate a moderation in Special Education cost increases over the last three years. This seems to hold for both in and out of district expenses. With rates of student identification, need for outside placements, and need for current level of internal program supports and services remaining relatively stable, this data would support maintenance of similar resources, staffing and efforts.

Implications moving forward would be supportive of ongoing program monitoring and needs assessments. While a quantitative analysis as referenced in the trend reports may suggest success with the maintenance of level services and supports, the myriad of challenges regularly presented by some of the districts most vulnerable students always suggests a high probability of a need for extreme or extraordinary support or service outside the realm of routine and available resources.

D. Global Recommendations

1. Response to Intervention (RTI) programs need to be supported. Early intervention and associated progress monitoring efforts are essential to addressing student challenges early and decreasing the likelihood a student might need future special education services.
2. A range of interventions needs to be cultivated, maintained and implemented to best serve the array of challenges presented by students. Appropriate and adequate resource materials must be identified and purchased.
3. Universally Designed Instruction needs to be encouraged at every level as broadly and comprehensively as possible. Adequate staffing needs to be available, and all staff should be

trained in the development and delivery of a variety of instructional models to address the varying learning styles and challenges presented by students.

Implementation of this approach early and extensively helps minimize challenges faced by at-risk students before learning weaknesses are exacerbated by mounting gaps in mastery. As a result, the number of Specialists, Resource Teachers, and RTI Inclusion Experts needed to provide these services must be continually monitored, assessed and added to as needed.

Belmont's practice of utilizing Special Education Teachers, RTI Inclusion Experts, Speech and Language Therapists and Reading Specialists to implement RTI programs continually taxes the abilities of all the available staff. Adequate staffing in all of these roles maximizes staff effectiveness and subsequent student success. Building recommendations for possible additions to the staffing in these areas need to be met.

4. District identification information about rates and disability types should continually be monitored. Ongoing review of presenting student needs best informs staff, resource and programmatic decisions.

5. Adequate allocation of funds and resources must be maintained to support student needs through effective staffing, program structure, materials, and out placement settings. In order to best provide for this, the quantitative analysis founding much of this report must be viewed in conjunction with the qualitative reality of the district's student needs.

Student socio-emotional needs, for example, have greatly intensified over the past several years in spite of a noted reduction in identification of IEP students in this category. The need for support staff in this area has increased considerably. The district needs to allocate and add staff accordingly depending on individual building recommendations and needs. Additional Mental Health/Guidance Counselors and Behavior Specialists seem warranted on every level.

Students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) challenges are another area where the district's resources are taxed even though the current data indicates a stable rate of IEP identification. The intensity of student needs presenting in this area warrants consideration of additional Inclusion Specialist staff to effectively meet the demands.