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SPOTLIGHT

Improving Special Education: DMGroup's Best Practices for Cost Effectively Raising Achievement

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With DMGroup's best practice approach to improving special education, districts have seen dramatic gains in achievement and inclusion and expanded services for students with disabilities, while working within existing budgets.

IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION:

DMC's Best Practices for Cost Effectively Raising Achievement

Nathan Levenson and Christopher Cleveland

DMC Spotlight represents the thinking and approach
of the District Management Council

No one seems satisfied with the state of serving students with special needs, and for good reason. In nearly every school district across the country, the conversation is the same. Parents are concerned that their children aren't well enough prepared to succeed in life, college, and career. Students themselves often feel excluded or frustrated by ever-higher standards that they can't seem to meet. Classroom teachers feel underprepared to address ever-mounting student needs, and special education teachers feel stretched thin. Despite the hard work of so many caring people and the mounting resources dedicated year after year, disappointment and frustration persist.

But there is reason to be hopeful. Based on extensive research by the What Works Clearinghouse, the National Reading Panel, John Hattie's *Visible Learning*, numerous major research studies, and our own hands-on work with almost a hundred districts, the District Management Council (DMC) has developed and honed a best-practice approach to improving special education. With DMC's approach, districts have seen dramatic gains in achievement and inclusion and have expanded services for students with disabilities; the cost is no more, and in some cases less, than current efforts; and these strategies have helped other struggling students, including struggling readers, students living in poverty, those requiring Response to Intervention (RTI), and even some English Language Learners (ELLs). It is a commonsense but not commonplace approach developed based on a synthesis of pedagogical research, scheduling expertise, change management techniques, data from hundreds of districts, and in-depth study of those districts most successful in this area.



To date, DMC has helped implement this approach in almost a hundred districts. The exciting news is that our method has been shown to help a lot, not just a little. For example:

- A suburban district narrowed the high school achievement gap by 66% and reduced the number of struggling readers by 65% in grades K-5.
- A mixed urban/suburban district tripled the eighth-grade ELA proficiency among students with disabilities from 12.8% to 33.3%; proficiency rates in math also rose from 14.6% to 27.5%.
- An urban district increased middle school reading proficiency by four to eight points while the state average decreased by five points. Its high school graduation rate increased from 68% to 82%.

In our experience, big gains are possible and cost-neutral, but the transformations don't come easily or quickly. Implementing best practices requires detailed data; broad-based participation by parents, teachers, principals, and the central office; careful planning; strong communication; and patient, steadfast, hard work. Fear of noncompliance, uncertainty about regulations, and concerns about deep sensitivities to any changes make adding staff and layering in programs the path of least resistance. But if districts are to improve the performance of students with special needs, this important work must be tackled, and these best practices need to be put in place.

DMC's 10 Best Practices for Improving Special Education

The following 10 best practices, when implemented well with a systems-thinking approach, can dramatically improve the lives of struggling students with and without Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This approach can also have a positive effect on the budget as it results in more effective and efficient allocation of resources. There is one important caveat: some students have unique needs not entirely addressed by this approach, especially students with severe disabilities, autism, or students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) new to the country.

We at DMC hope these ideas will spark interest and encourage districts to think about implementing these best practices for the maximum benefit of students and the budget.

1 Focus on student outcomes, not inputs

First and foremost, districts that have raised achievement, expanded inclusion, and improved the social, emotional, and behavioral health of students keep the focus on results. In too many districts, if last year's efforts didn't work as well as desired, more staff, more paraprofessionals, more co-teaching, and more hours of service are added. These changes seldom help students and always cost more. Over the past decade, districts increased the number of special educators and paraprofessionals per 1,000 students by more than 10%, and yet achievement levels have barely budged.¹ If the current approach isn't achieving great outcomes, current practice must be reviewed and modified. History shows that continuing to add resources and layer in solutions does not yield success.

2 Effective general education instruction is key

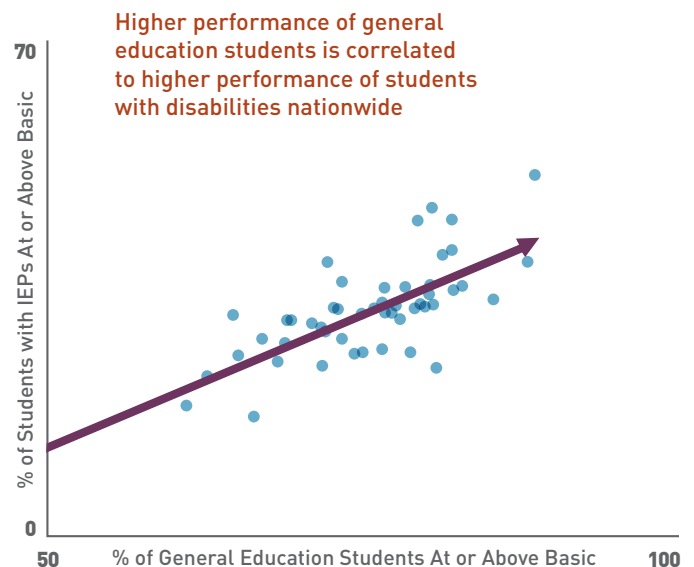
Effective general education instruction is key: higher performance of general education students correlates to higher performance of students with disabilities, as shown by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (*Exhibit 1*).²

Students with special needs and students who struggle spend most of their day in the general education classroom;

therefore, core instruction provided by the classroom teacher must meet most of their needs (not all, but most). In some districts, a culture has emerged where special education staff take the lead in serving students with disabilities. In many schools, elementary school children who struggle to read are pulled out of the core reading block to be taught by a special education teacher or paraprofessional. While well-intentioned, these practices often shift responsibility for student success away from the general education teacher to a special education teacher or paraprofessional. If we want students to master the general education curriculum, general education teachers have to be a big part of the solution.

Students are best served academically when their general education teacher takes primary responsibility for their learning. Beyond core instruction, even interventions are often best provided by general education staff, which is the hallmark of RTI. Fundamentally, RTI and efforts like it embrace general education as the foundation for all students' success.

Exhibit 1 NAEP GRADE 4 READING PERFORMANCE BY STATE



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment, 2015.

3 Ensure all students can read

In many districts, up to half of the referrals to special education are, at their root, due to reading difficulties. Referral rates jump in third through sixth grades when reading problems make it difficult to learn math, science, and social studies. An overwhelming majority of students who have not mastered reading by the end of third grade will continue to struggle throughout high school and beyond. These students tend to have increased rates of behavioral problems in later grades and are less likely to graduate from high school or to enroll in college.³

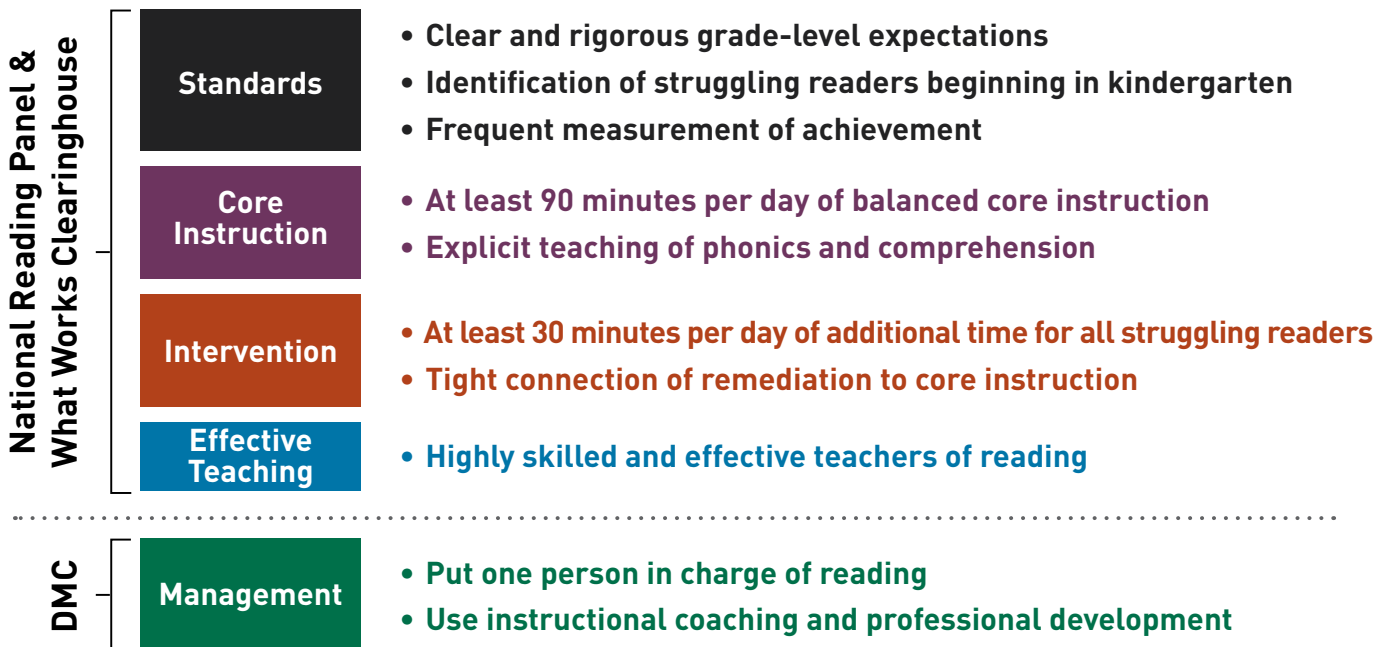
The good news is that well-established best practices for teaching reading exist. Drawing from the National Reading Panel, the What Works Clearinghouse, and DMC experience, DMC has assembled the 10 most essential best practices (*Exhibit 2*). Districts have dramatically reduced the number of struggling readers by using these proven strategies. And,

implementing these best practices typically costs less than what most districts are already spending on this key skill. The bad news is that not many districts faithfully implement these best practices. The worst news is that in too many districts, students with mild to moderate disabilities are more likely than general education students to be excluded from these best practices.

4 Provide extra instructional time for struggling students every day

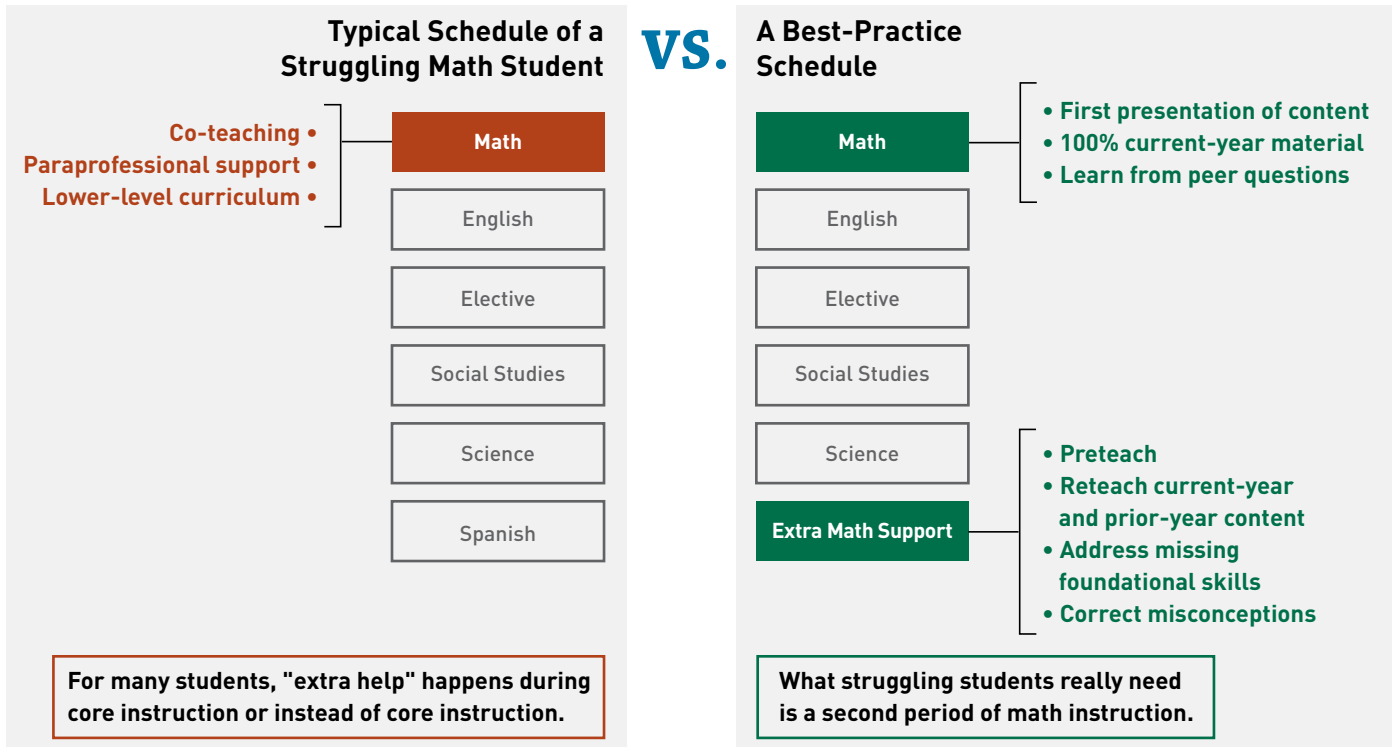
Students who have difficulty achieving grade-level standards often need more time for instruction in order to catch up and keep up with their peers. These students must master previous content, plus they may need current content explained a few more times than their nonstruggling peers. At the elementary level, students who have difficulty with reading should receive at least 30 minutes a day of additional reading instruction. At the secondary level, where the

Exhibit 2 ELEMENTARY READING BEST PRACTICES



Source: National Reading Panel, What Works Clearinghouse, experience of districts who have dramatically improved reading scores

Exhibit 3 COMMON PRACTICE VS. BEST PRACTICE IN PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH EXTRA TIME



Source: DMC

content is more complex and the scope of prior learning even larger, the extra instructional time required for struggling students to catch up and master grade-level content is typically an extra period per day. This model is often referred to as the “double dose” support model. At both the elementary and secondary levels, this additional time can be used to preteach materials, reteach the day’s lesson, address missing foundational skills, and correct misunderstandings.

In many schools, struggling students are provided extra adults, but not extra time. Struggling learners may receive additional support from a teaching assistant, paraprofessional, special education teacher, co-teacher, etc., while staying in the same classroom as their peers for the same duration as their peers. Some schools have specialized instruction in place, but it is typically not in addition to

the regular period. Struggling students, for example, may be assigned to a “replacement” class, a lower-level general education class that covers less content with less rigor.

Extra “help time” should not be confused with extra instructional time. It is common for students with special needs to have a resource room period or a support period where a special education teacher provides ad hoc help or test prep across multiple subjects, grades, and courses. This is not the same as a daily dedicated extra period focused explicitly on math skills, for example.

Districts that have successfully closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students with and without special needs provide extra instructional time each day in addition to core content instruction time (*Exhibit 3*).

5 Ensure that content-strong staff provide interventions and support

As standards have risen and the complexity of the content has increased, staff's having a deep understanding and mastery of what they teach becomes even more important. A teacher who has engaged in extensive study and training in a particular subject is more likely to have a wider repertoire of ways to teach the material.

Imagine a student who is having difficulty with eighth-grade math. The student receives a period of instruction each day from a skilled math teacher, and yet still struggles. During the extra period of math support, the student will still need a skilled math teacher to review the topic, review wrong answers, infer what misconceptions led to this error, and then reteach the approach. This process asks a lot of the teacher, but a lot is required.

However, in most districts, extra instruction is provided either by paraprofessionals, who are not teachers, or by special education teachers, who have expertise in pedagogy but often are generalists without expertise in teaching subjects such as math, English, and reading.

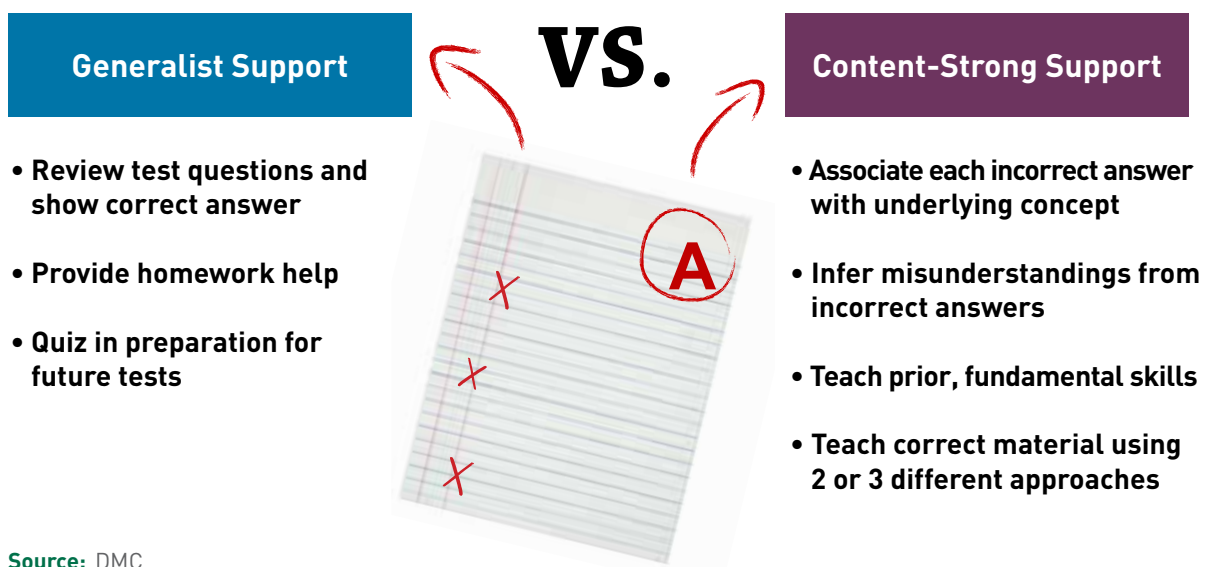
Certainly some special educators are very strong reading, writing, and math teachers, but not all. One large-scale study by the National Council on Teacher Quality indicated that only 2% of special education teacher programs prepare these teachers for content-strong instruction.⁴

Districts that have made the most significant gains among struggling students have done so by providing these students, whether or not they have IEPs, with teachers skilled in content instruction during extra instructional time (*Exhibit 4*).

6 Allow special educators to play to their strengths

Districts that have made strides in improving services for struggling students have focused on ensuring that teachers are able to play to their strengths. For example, some special education teachers may have expertise in specific content areas, while others may be very efficient and skilled in assessing and managing the IEP process. It is highly beneficial to leverage these areas of expertise. In general, there are four ways a special education teacher's role may be tailored:

Exhibit 4 GENERALIST SUPPORT VS. CONTENT-STRONG SUPPORT



- **Content-Specific Expertise:** Teachers who have particular strengths in academic content areas (e.g. reading instruction, math instruction) should focus on maximizing their time supporting students in their academic area of specialization.
- **Pedagogical Expertise:** Teachers with pedagogical expertise should coach general education teachers on accommodating the needs of students with disabilities and on using scaffolding, differentiation, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), chunking, and other teaching strategies.
- **Social-Emotional Expertise:** Special education teachers with a strong background in providing social-emotional or behavior supports to students should focus on delivering these important supports. These teachers can work with students on self-monitoring strategies and can coach teachers on how to avoid behavior triggers.
- **Case Management Expertise:** Some special education teachers are particularly efficient and effective in managing the IEP process. These teachers should focus on case management responsibilities and thereby allow other special education teachers more time to serve students.

Making these shifts in roles enables teachers to focus on applying their particular strengths to benefit students. Specialization of roles also simplifies professional development for special education teachers; teachers can develop deeper skills in one area rather than having to master many different skills and specialties. Teachers often express their frustration at having to choose among keeping up on the latest regulations, learning about effective instructional practices, and staying abreast of ever-changing curriculum.

7 Focus paraprofessional support on health, safety, and behavior needs, rather than on academic needs


Across the country, the number of paraprofessionals per 1,000 students has increased by 27% since 2000.⁵ Paraprofessionals play a critical role in the lives and education of many students, especially those with severe needs, autism, or behavior issues. They also play a potentially lifesaving role for students with health issues and have helped expand inclusion. Indeed, the number of students with severe disabilities, autism, and behavior needs has

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increased, and more paraprofessionals have been counted on to meet these needs.

However, paraprofessionals have also been given a growing role in supporting academic needs. A DMC review of 1,500 detailed schedules of paraprofessionals from 20 districts revealed that elementary paraprofessionals working in general education or resource classrooms (the most common setting for paraprofessionals) spend fully 40% of their day providing academic support or instruction. In some districts, 70% or more of the paraprofessional's day is dedicated to teaching reading to struggling students. In countless interviews, paraprofessionals and special education teachers refer to the paraprofessional in this role as a reading tutor or teacher.

This seemingly logical, caring effort actually runs counter to many of the best practices. As we've discussed, these students need to be receiving instruction from content-strong teachers, and they need to be receiving extra instructional time instead of having additional support during core instruction. What's more, the presence of an aide can actually *decrease* the amount of instruction a student receives from the classroom teacher; it is not uncommon for a classroom teacher to feel that a student with an aide already has 100% of an adult's time, and therefore to focus attention on those students without aides. As a result, students with the greatest needs receive the least attention from a teacher certified in the subject. Finally, an aide hovering beside a student creates a social barrier, stifling peer interaction and thereby defeating one of the primary benefits of inclusion.



It is important that districts focus paraprofessional support on health, safety, and behavior needs, and have certified reading teachers, RTI interventionists, and other trained specialists focused on academic and other specific needs. Fortunately, most districts can shift their staffing to better meet the needs of students in a cost-neutral way.

8 Expand the reach and impact of social, emotional, and behavioral supports

Addressing students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs is critical. Social, emotional, and behavioral skills enable students to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, and cope with challenges. These skills allow students to pursue academic success. It is hard for children to learn and for teachers to teach when these needs go unmet.

Many districts have responded by adding counselors, social workers, or paraprofessionals. But in an era of tight budgets, districts still feel understaffed to meet the overwhelming need. The key is to expand the reach and impact of existing staff, expand staffing by shifting resources, and partner with others to provide free or low-cost services.

Psychologists, social workers, counselors, and behaviorists are asked to do many, many things. They play an integral role in the identification and evaluation of special education students, manage many IEPs and 504s, attend meetings, coach teachers, communicate with parents, and of course, directly support students. However, the time these staff dedicate to directly serving students versus all the other tasks varies significantly between districts, even among like-districts just a few miles apart.

One large district found that although it had a large team of social workers, only 45% of the day on average was spent with students, and many social workers spent far less time than that with students (*Exhibit 5*). As points of comparison, some schools target 75% of the day to be spent with students; and some clinics in teaching hospitals expect pediatric social workers to spend roughly 85% of their time with patients.

A DMC review of eight neighboring districts revealed that some psychologists spent over five days per initial or three-year evaluation while others completed the same tasks in about a day and a half. The discrepancy occurred not because

Expand Services: Pursue Partnerships

While the task of meeting the ever-increasing social and emotional needs of students can seem daunting, **partnering with local nonprofit agencies can help provide and pay for these services.**

One district partnered with a local nonprofit counseling agency that **provided and supervised 14 FTE graduate student counselors for the cost of 2.5 FTE district counselors.**

The agency also provided an expert in anger and stress management at no cost.

Another nonprofit provided a full-time licensed social worker paid for almost entirely from reimbursements from students' health insurance.

Those without insurance were treated at no cost, and students and families had no paperwork or copayments. A similar insurance-paid program was established with a well-respected drug and alcohol counseling nonprofit. All services were provided at school during the regular day.

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some worked faster or harder, but because the systems and expectations varied significantly by district. In fact, when staff moved from one district to the next, they quickly adapted to the prevailing standard. Some districts have managed to double the amount of student services delivered by existing staff by streamlining meetings and paperwork.

But even if all nonstudent work were streamlined, many districts still would be understaffed. Fortunately, many districts can improve and expand social, emotional, and behavioral supports within their existing budget by shifting to having fewer staff overall but a higher number of staff with the particular skills required.

Behaviorists, for example, are often called miracle workers by principals, teachers, and parents. These highly skilled professionals can diagnose why a student has disruptive outbursts, can provide students with coping mechanisms, and can give guidance to teachers on avoiding triggers. Most schools want and need more of these services, but determine that the budget can’t allow for it. Instead, paraprofessionals are hired to help students after behavioral incidents. A better solution is to increase the number of behaviorists, reduce the number of paraprofessionals, and have the remaining paraprofessionals report directly to behaviorists and provide ad hoc support to multiple classrooms.

Finally, some districts further expand social and emotional services by partnering with local nonprofit counseling

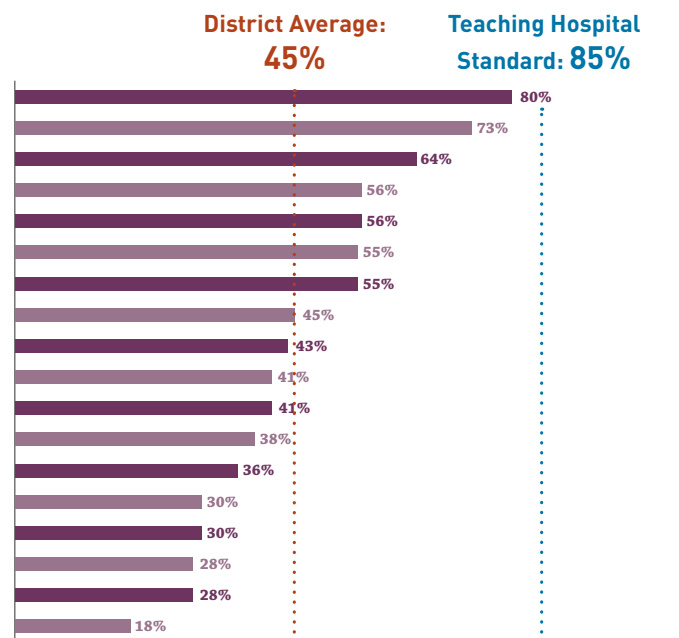
agencies, teaching hospitals, graduate psychology programs, or even insurance-funded mental health counselors.

9 Provide high-quality in-district programs for students with more severe needs


Most parents want great programs in their local schools to meet their children’s needs, but when good options aren’t available, they want to send their children to suitable programs outside the district. Despite long bus rides, less inclusion, and little connection to their town, out-of-district placements are necessary when no equal option is available in-district.

In the past, many mid-sized and smaller districts decided against providing in-house special education programs; these districts felt they lacked sufficient numbers of students at any given grade level to justify the cost of such services. This needn’t be the case. If a district has at least three students with similar

Exhibit 5 SOCIAL WORKER DIRECT SERVICE



Source: DMC



To implement best practices at-scale and in a cost-effective manner, districts must have a detailed understanding of how staff are currently serving students.

needs within the same age range, it may be more cost-effective to establish an in-house program than to place the students in an out-of-district program.

Of course, the savings resulting from decreased tuition payments and transportation costs must be invested in providing enhanced in-district services. The key to providing effective and cost-effective programs is to hire staff with the right skills and training, to adjust staffing levels throughout the year as enrollment shifts, and to provide dedicated leadership for these programs.

10 Know how staff spend their time, and provide guidance on effective use of time

Nearly every classroom teacher in every school in America has seen his or her job shift from working alone in a classroom from September to June to working as part of a team (including PLCs, embedded professional development, district-developed lesson plans, formative assessments, and pacing guides). Schools and districts plan how best to use a reading block, what materials to use, and when to monitor student progress. Many heads make better decisions and provide a consistent experience for students.

By contrast, special educators, related services providers, and RTI staff are typically left to themselves to figure out how best to help their students, how best to juggle the many demands on their time, and how best to schedule services. This serves neither the student, the teacher, nor the budget well.

To implement best practices at-scale and in a cost-effective manner, districts must have a detailed understanding of how staff are currently serving students. Then, the district must work collaboratively to establish expectations regarding the service delivery model and to set guidelines on the amount of time to be spent with students.

Given the vast range of tasks that staff perform, it is challenging for districts to develop an in-depth understanding of how staff spend their time. When districts utilize schedule-sharing technology to gain a deep understanding of current practices, both staff and administrators are often surprised at how much time is spent in meetings, how much service is provided 1:1 or 2:1 even though the IEPs call for small groups, and how much instruction is provided by paraprofessionals.

Armed with a detailed understanding of current practices, districts can thoughtfully plan what is the best use of time for each role, grade level, and student need. For example, a district might set the expectation that a struggling reader (with or without an IEP) receive the following: instruction 30 minutes a day, five times a week (in addition to the full core reading block), in a group of up to five students with similar needs and within a two-grade range, from a teacher with extensive training in teaching reading, and with that full-time teacher teaching seven groups a day. These are nuanced plans, not simple

Scheduling is both an art and a science, and effective scheduling is key to ensuring that student needs are best met.

one-size-fits-all. And yes, there will and should be exceptions to the rule, but having a rule based on best practices provides valuable guidelines.

Finally, school and district leaders must assist principals and special education and intervention staff to build thoughtful schedules in accordance with best practices. Too often, the master building schedule forces teachers to pull students from core instruction in reading or math, prevents grouping of students with like needs, or demands attendance at too many meetings. Scheduling is both an art and a science, and effective scheduling is key to ensuring that student needs are best met. There is no reason to believe every teacher or principal is an expert scheduler; even if they are, their schedule is impacted by dozens of other people's schedules, so efficient and effective schedules cannot be built in a vacuum. Coordinated scheduling is essential to ensure that time is being used most effectively.

Not easy or quick, but worth the effort

A proven, commonsense approach as captured in these best practices can help improve a child's success not only in school but in life. While implementing these best practices can have a significant positive impact, to say that implementation is easy would be misleading. It takes time and hard work to effect large-scale shifts in service delivery, staffing, scheduling, and roles and responsibilities. It takes time, much communication, and attentiveness to foster buy-in and ensure fidelity of implementation.

Districts that have been able to expand and improve services, increase inclusion, and close the achievement gap have generally devoted three or more years to the effort. During these years, many districts assembled cross-functional guiding coalitions that included leaders from general education, special

education, and RTI, as well as principals and many others. In addition, these districts also engaged in collaborative, open, and frequent dialogue with parents. These successful districts were determined to better serve students with special needs and students who struggle; tight finances would not stop them. While they understood that moving too fast could erode trust and understanding, they also knew that waiting to start would delay helping students in need. Clear goals, careful planning, and lots of communication helped to pave the way.

The increase in student needs, a fear of noncompliance, uncertainties about regulations, and deep concern about sensitivities to any changes in delivery of service often make adding staff, adding programs, and devoting mounting resources seem like the only option. Unfortunately, despite all the efforts of the past, the results have been disappointing. But there is hope. Taking a close look at current practices and taking a systems-thinking approach to implementing best practices can make a significant difference in student outcomes. It is hard work, and a time-consuming process, but well worth the effort to improve the lives of students with special needs and students who struggle. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ Fordham Institute, "Shifting Trends in Special Education," 2011.
- ² U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Assessment, 2015.
- ³ Annie E. Casey Foundation, "A KIDS COUNT Special Report: Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters," 2010.
- ⁴ National Council on Teacher Quality, "2014 Teacher Prep Review," 2015.
- ⁵ Fordham Institute, "Shifting Trends in Special Education," 2011.



DMC's 10 BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING SPECIAL EDUCATION

- 1** **Focus on student outcomes, not inputs**
- 2** **Effective general education instruction is key**
- 3** **Ensure all students can read**
- 4** **Provide extra instructional time for struggling students every day**
- 5** **Ensure that content-strong staff provide interventions and support**
- 6** **Allow special educators to play to their strengths**
- 7** **Focus paraprofessional support on health, safety, and behavior needs, rather than on academic needs**
- 8** **Expand the reach and impact of social, emotional, and behavioral supports**
- 9** **Provide high-quality in-district programs for students with more severe needs**
- 10** **Know how staff spend their time, and provide guidance on effective use of time**