

Improving Outcomes and Equity for Students with Disabilities and Other Students who Struggle

Findings Report Columbia Public Schools

February 13, 2023



New Solutions K12

Introduction

Columbia Public Schools (CPS) engaged New Solutions K12 (NSK12) to conduct a systematic study to review CPS' current regular and special education services, programs, procedures, and staffing for serving students who struggle. The study aims to support CPS' efforts to improve the effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and equity of serving students with special needs and other students who struggle. CPS has many things to be proud of as a district such as the quality of services provided to students with disabilities and the hard work of staff who help all children achieve at high levels. This report serves to address ever-higher expectations and the impact of the on-going pandemic.

The research conducted included extensive in-person and virtual interviews and focus groups, a deep look at hard data, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices and like-communities, and a review of existing reports and district documents. In all cases, the evaluation recognizes that increasing student achievement, meeting the social and emotional needs of students, managing costs, and respecting children, parents, and staff are equally important. Addressing one, while ignoring the others, is not an option.

The systematic study 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.

New Solutions K12 will work alongside Columbia Public Schools to review this information and determine the appropriate next steps for implementation and improvement. Not all areas for further consideration listed in the document can be addressed at once. If the district were to pursue any of these areas further, it would typically take 1-3 years of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out, with a commitment from the leadership to provide focus and stability during the implementation process.

Executive Summary

Recommendations

1. Staff care deeply about their students.
2. Special education staff feel well supported by their leadership.
3. The district has many best practice elements in place.
4. The district has a sophisticated and thoughtful special education organizational structure.
5. The district has a strong commitment to restorative practices.
6. Programs for students with severe special needs were well staffed and well-resourced.

Opportunities

1. Focus On Improving Core Instruction

- 1a. Clearly articulate a districtwide approach to some aspects of core instruction
- 1b. Create high expectations for all students
- 1c. Expand the reach and scale of instructional coaching

2. Align Intervention To Best Practices Including Extra Time With Content Strong Staff

- 2a. Formalize, normalize and expand existing best practice intervention efforts
- 2b. Embrace inclusion, but don't assume co-teaching is the only path to inclusion.
- 2c. Extra time intervention means direct instruction, not iReady minutes or drop-in.
- 2d. Extra time intervention must be taught by content strong staff.
- 2e. Maximize the reach and impact of talented intervention staff
- 2f. Extra time intervention requires centralized scheduling support.

3. Relaunch And Expand The Use Of iReady

- 3a. Acknowledge the problematic launch and formally start again.
- 3b. The district should use iReady for progress monitoring, data collection, and for forming targeted intervention groups, but not as an intervention itself.

4. Provide Additional Support For Classroom Teachers To Address Behavioral Challenges

- 4a. Reduce the noninstructional load on teachers.
- 4b. Clearly divide responsibility for supporting students with problematic behavior.
- 4c. Align on a common philosophy and create a unified team for behavior support.

5. Add Role Clarity and Increase Teamwork To Supporting Students With Special Needs

- 5a. Greater clarity of roles and decision making rights will improve current structure.
- 5b. Convene an inclusive, facilitated, team to clarify roles, responsibilities and decision making rights with special education.

6. Applying An Equity Lens To The Recommendations

- 6a. Improve core instruction through high expectations.
- 6b. Black students are over identified for special education.
- 6c. Many special education resource room classes are overwhelmingly serving students of color.
- 6d. The approach to problematic behavior disproportionately impacts students of color.

Commendations

There is much to be proud of in the Columbia Public Schools. What follows is a short list of a few of the many noteworthy commendations.

1. Staff Care Deeply About Their Students.

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that staff cared deeply about their students and wanted all students to be successful. Staff recognized that some students came to school with greater challenges than others and sought to address the different needs of their students. Many parents of students with disabilities said that their teachers were excellent and really felt they cared about their children's learning and wellbeing.

Being an educator is a demanding job, especially during times of a global pandemic, tight budgets, rising expectations, and increasing numbers of students with significant needs. Most staff members (both general education and special education) are excited and optimistic about working in Columbia Public Schools.

2. Special Education Staff Feel Well Supported By Their Leadership.

Special education staff across many roles felt well supported by district special education leadership. They found leadership to be approachable and communicative – meeting with staff regularly and being available to answer their questions.

Staff complimented the efforts, capabilities, and knowledge of the district's special education leadership to continuously improve the ways it supports special educators. This is impressive and uncommon in districts the size of Columbia. In addition, special education staff also feel supported by building-level special education coordinators.

3. The District Has Many Best Practice Elements In Place.

CPS has in place many of the key best practices needed to support students who struggle, both with and without disabilities. Some of the key best practices in place include:

- **Literacy:** The district has acknowledged the importance of literacy as the gateway to all other learning and placed significant emphasis and resources toward literacy development among its students, including students with disabilities and those struggling to read.
- **Investment in specialized staff:** The district has invested staffing instructional coaches and behavioral specialists.
- **Intervention:** Many schools strive to provide intervention to students who struggle academically, as well as socially and emotionally.
- **Focused and appropriate use of paraprofessionals:** School and district leaders reported that the use of paraprofessionals is mainly focused on student supervision, providing behavioral support, supporting work completion, providing select accommodations, and ensuring student safety – rather than academic support.

The best practices already in place are key elements of a thoughtful plan. That said, there is an opportunity for growth to improve the implementation of these elements.

4. The District Has A Sophisticated and Thoughtful Special Education Organizational Structure.

Special education is a complex function within a school district. While there is no one best way to organize the leadership, management and delivery of special education services, the structure in Columbia Public Schools includes many best practices, including:

- Building level support from staff with deep knowledge of special education for front line special educators
- A bridge between schools and central office to gather and share information
- Roles that specialize to narrow the needed range of expertise such as specializing in compliance, IEP management, behavior or content areas
- Frequent communication between senior leadership and other managers
- The ability of teachers and managers to ask questions and get timely answers

5. The District Has A Strong Commitment To Restorative Practices.

In recent years, many districts have embraced restorative practices, an approach that values mutual understanding, growth and community. It aims to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and building relationships.

Columbia Public Schools has had a commitment to restorative practices for more than a decade, well before many other districts. CPS has invested in training staff in restorative practices and is constantly updating its understanding of best practices.

Similar to a number of the commendations, some CPS strengths are also an opportunity for more impactful implementation.

6. Programs For Students With Severe Special Needs Are Well Staffed and Well-Resourced.

The district has a wide range of programs to serve students with severe special needs. Further, these programs are coherent and targeted to specific student needs, rather than being cross-categorical. In-district specialized classrooms have low student-to-staff ratios and are staffed by teachers who care about kids and deliver active instruction. The classrooms themselves are in good condition.

The district has prioritized serving nearly all students in the district.

Opportunities

Columbia Public Schools has a multitude of smart, caring teachers and has thoughtful, committed school and district leaders. Throughout this study, the New Solutions K12 team was impressed by the drive, compassion, hard work and knowledge of teachers and leaders. We also saw and learned about a great many best practices in the district. Yet, despite the hard work of many, few can be (or are) satisfied with the results for students with disabilities and others who struggle.

Across the nation and in Columbia Public Schools, before the pandemic, students with disabilities achieved at much lower levels than their nondisabled peers. Further, the disruption caused by the pandemic to the education of many students across the state resulted in significant learning loss. This was particularly problematic for students with disabilities.

The pandemic led to an overall decline in achievement and has left many students with disabilities further below grade level mastery. The pandemic made a troubling situation worse for students with disabilities.

- Before the pandemic fewer than 1 in 6 students with disabilities was proficient in English and less than 1 in 10 proficient in math.
- As a result of the pandemic and the disrupted learning achievement of students with special needs dropped further. English proficiency dropped by a nearly a third and math proficiency is now in single digits.

% of Students Scoring Proficient or Better on State Tests within Columbia Public Schools

Students with Disabilities

SY19

SY20

SY21

ELA

3rd	15%	NA	11%
8th	12%	NA	7%
English 2	15%	NA	12%

Math

3rd	10%	NA	7%
8th	7%	NA	1%
Algebra 1	9%	NA	9%

All Students

SY19

SY20

SY21

English Language Arts

3rd	45%	NA	39%
8th	49%	NA	44%
English 2	59%	NA	NA

Math

3rd	41%	NA	28%
8th	23%	NA	12%
Algebra 1	47%	NA	38%

Difference between Students with Disabilities and All Students

SY19

SY20

SY21

English Language Arts

3rd	-30%	NA	-28%
8th	-37%	NA	-37%
English 2	-44%	NA	NA

Math

3rd	-31%	NA	-21%
8th	-16%	NA	-11%
Algebra 1	-38%	NA	-29%

Unfortunately, it's not just students with disabilities that are struggling. Before the pandemic nearly half of students in the district were not proficient in English and much less than half were proficient in math. The pandemic made the situation more challenging.

For example, 8th grade proficiency dropped from just 23% pre pandemic to 12% during the pandemic.

This data is not intended to insult or alarm, but to be a call to action. In many ways, the district already has the right plan, tools and staff but must work to implement its plan better and take better advantage of the human and financial resources it has.

1. Focus On Improving Core Instruction

High quality, effective core instruction is the bedrock of all learning, including for students who struggle with and without special needs. No school or district can intervene their way to mastery. While intervention and extra help are important, they are effective only when provided after high quality core instruction. Few in the district question the importance of effective core instruction, on this there is much agreement. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of agreement on what constitutes effective rigorous core instruction. In order to improve the effectiveness of core instruction, the district must:

- Define what is effective instruction
- Commit to high expectations
- Provide extensive support to teachers

1a. Clearly articulate a districtwide approach to some aspects of core instruction.

The first step to implementing high quality core instruction is agreeing on what is high quality instruction. The recent history of school-level autonomy has led to a wide range of opinions, practices, and materials. Every school is a bit, or a lot, different from their peers. Historically, central office was supportive, but not directive.

If every school and every classroom is different, it is extremely difficult to implement teaching and learning best practices well. There can be no district wide PD, no outside partners to help, no focused coaching support and generally, no concerted effort to help teachers improve their craft and address the impact of the pandemic.

Moreover, in a district with many new teachers and students who switch schools within the district often, the lack of a consistent approach, materials, assessment and strategies is problematic for both students and teachers. Some schools reported up to 40% of students change schools and some reported 25% or more of teachers are new each year. In a district the size of Columbia Public Schools, not everything must or can be identical, but commonality of some aspects of core instruction should be. This includes:

- Common curriculum and instructional materials
- A few high leverage instructional practices
- District wide formative and summative assessment

Shifting from a history of much autonomy and variation to some key elements being consistent will require a balance act of both inclusion in decision making and a sense of non-negotiables as well. Ideally, the process of deciding what are the common curriculum, high leverage teaching practices and assessments is very inclusive. Teacher should and must have a voice in setting these new expectations. Equally important, principals, as the instructional leaders in their schools, must actively participate in setting these new expectations. If central office were to identify, screen and select the common materials, practices and assessments, they would likely be a thoughtful choice, but broadly rejected. Both teachers and principals shared that their lack of voice in selecting iReady, Haggerty, Benchmark or Foundations undermined their enthusiasm for their implementation.

Once an inclusive process has established the common expectations, a clear list of nonnegotiables should be shared. It needn't be a long list, but it should be honored. Principals will need to both support

teachers but also monitor alignment with the nonnegotiables in their school. The few nonnegotiables that have been established by the district are often not stressed by principals. Some openly give teachers permission not to do them. Currently instructional coaches feel they are tasked as being “the compliance cops” which undermines their ability to work with staff.

A tip: There should be a system that allows for rapid feedback from teachers on the implementation of the nonnegotiables. The district could establish an implementation advisory panel at each school level – elementary, middle, and high – so that teachers can give feedback in real time to the superintendent and other central office leaders. A similar feedback loop from principals is also helpful.

1b. Create high expectations for all students.

Even with the best materials such as curriculum, assessments and even effective teaching practices, what teachers think matters as much as what they do. In the recently published exhaustive summary of best practices, “Follow The Science to School” (Petrilli, Davidson and Carroll), the impact of teacher mindset is clear and compelling. If teachers doubt their students can master grade level materials, students quickly discern and then internalize this, ultimately becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

During many of our interviews, staff shared that many of their colleagues didn’t believe that students living in poverty or those who fell behind during the pandemic could reasonably be expected to catch up. A number of teachers also stated they felt state and district expectations were unreasonably high for some students. In all cases, these teachers deeply cared about their students and wanted the best for them, which included setting “realistic expectations” to avoid a sense of failure by the students. Many shared that out of kindness, teachers lowered their expectations of students of color, living in poverty, or having a disability in order to let kids feel successful. This is a form of unconscious bias, well-intentioned but harmful.

The New Solutions K12 team also observed this firsthand. In a number of intervention or resource room classes, teachers asked questions of their students and quickly provided the answer before the student had a chance to work the problem and think it through. When the student repeated the provided answer or simply concurred, there was celebration and praise.

We believe the teachers were wanting to make the students feel successful.

Another manifestation of low expectations is the use of the modified day. A modified day is an intentional plan that some students come to school for just half a day. The thinking is that they can’t handle a full day at school. Having studied the teaching and learning practices of over 150 districts, nearly none utilized the modified day other than as a temporary solution in a crisis situation. CPS has normalized the practice to a degree greater than we see elsewhere, and many mentioned they wished to expand its use. If a modified day is the only way to serve some students, this means that the supports that currently exist for them students are insufficient or inappropriate. 99.9% of students should be able to attend school, successfully, all day.

1c. Expand the reach and scale of instructional coaching.

Instructional coaching, called instructional mentors in the district, are staff dedicated to helping teachers improve their craft. Research is clear that instructional coaching, when implemented well, is the most effective means to improve core instruction when paired with a high-quality curriculum. It seems unlikely that opportunities 1a and 1b can be effectively implemented without a robust instructional coaching effort. Principals report that they don’t have the bandwidth, and some the

expertise, to support all the teachers in their school. With turnover as high as 25%, there is a large pool of staff who would benefit from instructional coaching.

The district has some instructional coaching already. The coaches seem skilled, talented, energetic and fully overwhelmed. They are stretched very thin and as such, cannot provide coaching in its best practice form. Teachers appreciated the coaches but felt they received small doses of help, infrequently.

The gold standard for instructional coaching is one coach to every 20 elementary classroom teachers or every 20 secondary core subject teachers. This allows for weekly interactions and coaches to join staff during common planning time. The staffing ratios in the district are far from this standard:

- 1 coach reported supporting 101 teachers
- 1 coach shared they support 7 middle schools
- 1 coach supported 4 elementary schools

Given these very large caseloads, the coaches, reasonably, pivoted away from one on one coaching, which is the best practice, to group efforts, curriculum development and support of the iReady rollout.

Even with the large caseloads, coaches are pulled into many noncoaching duties such as supporting individual students, helping plan tier 2 interventions and providing school and district wide PD. These are all worthwhile activities but further reduce time to improve core instruction.

Suggestion: Given the large number of new teachers each year, the district can augment its coaching efforts by running an intensive “university” program for new teachers. This often takes the form of three college level courses offered in district on key teaching and learning best practices. Teachers complete the courses over 2 years and receive credit on the salary scale for successful completion. These have been well received by staff and a competitive advantage during the hiring process.

2. Align Intervention To Best Practices Including Extra Time With Content Strong Staff.

Fundamental to effective academic support for students who struggle is that these students receive extra time to learn beyond core instruction. Extra time intervention should be a nonnegotiable for students who struggle in reading, ELA or math.

Core instruction is the foundation of all learning, but students with unfinished learning or academic challenges will require more than just core instruction. Many students will need extra instructional time during the school day to master grade level content.

This extra instructional time should be provided at a different time in the schedule than core instruction. It should be in addition to, not instead of, core. There simply isn't enough time to teach current year material as well as missing skills and content from prior years. It is unrealistic to expect a student with unfinished learning to master, for example, 7th grade math plus prior skills and content not yet mastered just during the time non-struggling peers need to master 7th grade math. These students have more to learn, and it will take them more time to learn.

Students who struggle academically, both with mild to moderate disabilities or no disability at all, benefit from extra time intervention. A similar strategy is warranted. Currently, different approaches are used from school to school and at different levels (elementary, middle and high school). Stark differences in approach also exist between students with and without disabilities, even if they have nearly identical needs.

2a. Formalize, normalize and expand existing best practice intervention efforts.

Fortunately, the district already has pockets of best practice interventions in place. Many elementary schools have adopted an approach to RTI for students who struggle and don't have an IEP that provides extra time intervention in reading. This is aligned with best practices. It seems that not all schools have a comprehensive approach to identify students who struggle nor do all schools provide all students who struggle this best practice intervention.

At the middle school level, the extra period classes Reading for Success and Math Skills also provide students who struggle extra time to master key skills. Similarly, some high school students can access a math skills class or an extra time intervention period.

Some students with IEPs also receive extra instructional time, targeted to their academic needs in the form of a special education resource room.

These pockets of best practice intervention, however, are not the norm for most students who struggle. Many students with academic challenges are provided one of the following:

- **Co-teaching:** Many students with disabilities are placed in general education classes that have two teachers, a general education teacher and a special education teacher.
- **iReady:** At the middle schools, many students who struggle work independently on iReady lessons.
- **Drop in help:** At the high school, students can opt into on demand help from teachers via resource lab or academic lab.
- **Replacement classes.** A replacement class is a course that, as the name suggests, replaces the typical grade level class.

None of these widely used options provide students with extra time to catch up with direct instruction from a content strong teacher.

2b. Embrace inclusion, but don't assume co-teaching is the only path to inclusion.

Currently, at CPS, co-teaching is a preferred intervention for students with disabilities because it is considered a more inclusive, less restrictive environment for students with special needs. Legally, ethically, and in pursuit of higher achievement, inclusion is a best practice. Nothing in this report should be construed as suggesting otherwise. Many in the district, however, seem to equate the two and assume inclusion requires co-teaching and the alternative to co-teaching are less inclusive separate classrooms.

Best practices and gap closing districts embrace inclusion, but not co-teaching. Strong core instruction plus extra time intervention from content strong staff affords both inclusion and higher achievement.

While co-teaching may appear to be more inclusive, it actually limits students' access to high-quality core instruction taught by a classroom teacher. High-quality core instruction is only effective if a student is able to fully pay attention and participate in it. While co-teaching may seem like a thoughtful alternative to pulling out students during core instruction, it often impedes meaningful access to core instruction. Co-teaching often creates an invisible barrier between students with an IEP and their general education teacher. If a student is receiving instruction from a special education teacher during core instruction, their access to the general education teacher is reduced. If both the general education teacher and special educator are talking at the same time, it is impossible for the student to listen to two people at once. Concentrating on their special education service provider limits their ability to concentrate on core instruction. The student will miss some of the whole class lesson while they are getting support from the special educator. While kids are in the room for 100% of the core lesson, if the second adult talks to them, works with them, teaches a mini lesson, or does almost anything, then the student's attention is pulled away from the core lesson. Moreover, if students are pulled to the back of the room to work on specific skills or needs, they are again missing important learning.

During classroom observations, we observed several flavors of co-teaching:

- Co-teachers switching off delivering direct instruction and grading papers
- Special education teachers standing in the back of the classroom observing for much of the period
- Special education teachers providing extra help to special education students while the general education teacher provides instruction to the other children

It is very possible to embrace inclusion without using co-teaching. Moving away from co-teaching is not moving away from inclusion. Instead, it is moving toward more effective methods of inclusion, such as extra time intervention.

2c. Extra time intervention means direct instruction, not iReady minutes or drop-in.

Having extra time intervention is important. What happens during this extra time is even more important. There is not a one-size-fits-all game plan for what to teach during extra instructional time. The specific skill and content needs of the students in the room should drive instruction. Students with mild to moderate disabilities and other who struggle will benefit most from direct instruction during this time, not homework help, completion of current year assignments or computer-generated instruction.

Currently, CPS provides little direct instruction during existing extra time intervention. In the middle school, for example, intervention periods are often spent logging “iReady minutes” with kids plugged into the program on tablets. Students are aware of this fixation on minutes; staff remarked that students even know to fake minutes in order to satisfy their instructor. Effective extra time intervention requires direct instruction by a teacher who can motivate, explain in multiple ways, and target specific skills. Instead, the pacing of which skills and content to teach when should be influenced by the pacing of core instruction, with extra instructional time addressing pre-cursor skills and knowledge needed in the upcoming week(s).

The focus on how many minutes rather than what is done during those minutes carries over to how IEPs are written. In many of our conversations, staff discussed how they must deliver “IEP minutes” instead of discussing math, reading etc. To be clear, the services do of course focus on math, reading and other topics, but the language is revealing.

We also found a reliance on drop in extra help as intervention. Drop in is also not an effective extra time intervention because it is not direct instruction, doesn’t happen daily and doesn’t address precursor skills. Drop in help is mostly homework help.

2d. Extra time intervention must be taught by content strong staff.

Who provides extra instructional time matters as much as *how much* extra instructional time is provided. CPS has dedicated much time, energy, and resources into ensuring the right number of full-time equivalents (FTE) are in these critical roles. However, it is also important that these staff have the appropriate skills. Jim Collins in his book “Good to Great” said it best, “It’s critical to have the right people on the bus in the right seats.”

Research shows that the content expertise of a teacher has significant bearing on the student’s likelihood of mastering the material taught. Content strong staff can teach a concept multiple ways, identify missing skills, correct misconceptions, and break down complex ideas in ways that are more accessible for kids who have struggled to learn. Because students with academic challenges have already been taught a concept in the past but haven’t yet mastered it, the teacher will need multiple means of reteaching the concept. Simply teaching it a second time - the same way it was taught the first time - isn’t likely to lead to greater understanding.

Ideally, content strong teachers will also be able to see a wrong answer and infer where the student had a misunderstanding. For example, if a student thinks the answer is 7, but it was actually 11, a teacher with deep content expertise could infer that the student divided by 2 in the second step instead of multiplying by 2 and thus could pinpoint the instruction to address this misunderstanding.

Extra instructional time is most effective when math is taught by teachers with expertise in math, writing by teachers skilled in teaching writing, and reading by staff specifically trained in teaching reading.

Content strong teachers come in a variety of forms. The best indicator of a content strong teacher is an educator’s training and their past student growth. Certification, role and title are not good indicators of who has content expertise or relevant subject specific training. Some special educators have extensive training in teaching reading, others not. Some reading teachers know a lot about the science of elementary reading but not secondary. Skills, training and aptitude matter, and certification doesn’t correlate to these skills.

In CPS, students with disabilities seldom receive help from content strong staff, and their general education peers who struggle may or may not receive intervention from content strong staff depending on which school they attend.

While paraprofessionals mostly supported non-academic needs across the district, some staff reported paraprofessionals were tasked for intervention and/or instruction in lieu of a licensed teacher. While general use of paraprofessionals is discussed in commendation 3, there are pockets of programs or schools that utilize paraprofessionals for roles beyond their instructional expertise.

2e. Maximize the reach and impact of talented intervention staff.

There are some very talented intervention staff across CPS, and their reach and impact could be increased. During classroom observations, we observed groups with one to three kids and sometimes two adults. One intervention classroom had an incredibly talented teacher help 3 students for one period and then just a single student the next. In another classroom, an experienced special educator helped 3 students while a paraprofessional looked on. The students were well behaved and the teaching strong. There was little for the paraprofessional to do. In many instances, great teachers are helping very few students.

Research has shown that in comparison to group size, the training and background of the instructor, the length of extra instructional time provided, and the type of instruction presented are more significant factors for increasing student achievement. Grouping students with similar areas of need also makes larger groups easier to teach.

The best practice is 5-8 students in elementary small groups and 15 students in secondary small groups. The RTI Action Network recommends utilizing groups of 5-8 students for the majority of students who struggle (~15% of all students receiving 30 minutes of additional instruction 5x a week) and recommends smaller groups of 1-3 students for only students with severe reading disabilities (approximately ~3% of all students).¹

2f. Extra time intervention requires centralized scheduling support.

If the district opts to greatly expand the use of extra time intervention and wants to incorporate best practices of slightly larger groups, groups formed with students with similar needs, groups that flexibly reform as needs change and the pairing of content strong staff to these groups, it is likely that schools will require help with building these more complex schedules.

Based on our prior work with the district, not all schools have expert scheduling expertise. This is not surprising since few school leaders receive training in scheduling. It is an unreasonable expectation to assume every school has the skill or experience to build these more complex, yet more student centered, schedules. Central office and/or partners will be needed to support the building of schedules that incorporate best practice intervention.

¹ Harlacher, J., Sanford, A., & Walker, N. (2015). Distinguishing Between Tier 2 and Tier 3 Instruction in Order to Support Implementation of RTI.

3. Relaunch and Expand the Use of iReady.

iReady is a comprehensive software tool that is currently used in the middle school and is slated to be used more widely in the future. It is a well-respected, sophisticated education software. Many districts have had success with it, and it supports many teaching and learning best practices. That said, the majority of teachers in the district that use iReady dislike it and as currently used, it is likely undermining student achievement, not helping it. The push back against the software is intense. A number of staff reported hearing students say, “My teacher hates iReady” and students have learned to “fake” using the tool. As mentioned in opportunity 2, iReady has crowded out best practice intervention as well.

So, if staff are unhappy with it and it’s not currently being used in ways that help students, why stick with it and expand its use? Because the tool is fine, good even, but the implementation is not.

The iReady implementation had three short coming:

- Lack of clarity in its purpose
- Insufficient training
- Lack of real time feedback loop from teachers

iReady does a lot. Too much for most districts to utilize well. It can provide lessons, intervention, assessments, monitoring student growth, group students by area of need, pinpointing missing skills and provide computer-based instruction. It is a Swiss army knife. The district never determined which aspects of iReady were to be prioritized. Neither teachers nor principals are sure which modules are most important and why. Some staff are pleased with the tool, but they are in the minority.

The rollout was also problematic. Teachers reported having insufficient training and limited feedback. Principals were not involved in its selection, don’t have clarity on its purpose and as a result can’t champion it or help implement it.

3a. Acknowledge the problematic launch and formally start again.

Moving forward will likely require taking a step back. Senior leaders should acknowledge the challenges, hear directly from staff, and formally mark a new start. Just working to fix the problems will not erase the hard feelings. There should be process of ending one chapter and starting another.

One staff member commented, “We are a district with ADHD. We start so much but never get good at implementing anything.” Sticking with iReady, and rolling it out a second time with clarity, support and a feedback loop can help change this perception.

3b. The district should use iReady for progress monitoring, data collection and for forming targeted intervention groups, but not as an intervention itself.

iReady can do a lot, too much to tackle all at once. The district can best use iReady to identify which kids need extra help and in which skills. It can help collect data for intervention and track student’s mastery as they receive supports. This makes iReady an important tool to support extra time intervention.

iReady itself should NOT be an intervention. It is a tool for the teacher, not for the student. The computer directed lessons in iReady should not replace targeted direct instruction by teachers during intervention. The computer can’t replace the teacher. It can provide important information to help guide the teacher’s lessons and instruction.

iReady should not add more work to a teacher's plate nor should it increase the amount of testing done in the district. If iReady is used as a screener and as common formative assessments, it should replace, not be layered upon, existing assessments. This means MAP, Ames Web, and other district developed assessments should be phased out.

Like any large-scale implementation, this restart will require extensive training, communication, real time feedback loops from teachers, help from coaches and support from principals. It will also require ongoing, extensive training for new staff each year. The cadre of teachers who are pleased with iReady could have a lead role in working with their colleagues.

4. Provide Additional Support for Classroom Teachers to Address Behavioral Challenges.

One consequence of the pandemic has been a dramatic rise in students with challenging behaviors. Even before the disruption of the last few years, there has been a rise in students with problematic behavior.

All districts are working to address this growing need. Broadly speaking there are three common approaches:

- Build the capacity of teachers to address problematic behavior
- Create a cadre of behavior specialists to address problematic behavior
- Some combination of the first two options

The district's current approach is closest to the first option, build the capacity of teachers to address problematic behavior. Given the current context, this may not be the best path forward. Classroom teachers are stressed, overwhelmed and asked to much, and more will be asked as a result of opportunities 1, 2 and 3.

4a. Reduce the noninstructional load on teachers.

Any strategy that places a large increased set of noninstructional responsibilities on teachers is likely to fail and likely to undermine implementation of the academic priorities. Yes, teachers play a role in managing student behavior, but it should be focused and limited.

Teachers work hard and they're being asked to do more every year. "We are a district with ADHD." An increase in challenging behaviors has added even more stress to every teacher. Staff shared that one behavior plan was a 46-page document for teachers to implement. This asking too much. They're stretched thin and burnt out.

Relying on classroom teachers as the primary support for problematic behavior has also created two unintended consequences:

- **This has resulted in over-identification.** This approach has created a culture in which some teachers and staff are overly reactive to lower-level student behaviors. It was noted that too often teachers skip the pre-referral intervention process for students with behavioral challenges and instead move quickly toward a special education referral with little to no prior interventions.
- **A lack of robust tier 3 behavior support has given life to the idea that many of these students can't stay in the school.** There were many requests for increased out of school placements at both the middle and high school.

4b. Clearly divide responsibility for supporting students with problematic behavior.

Building classroom teachers' capacity to address problematic behaviors is fine, to a point. It is practical and helpful if classroom teachers are skilled in tier 1 and mild tier 2 behavior management. This includes how to set routines, create a welcoming environment, build authentic relationships and address routine low level behaviors. These skills have long been part of an effective and experienced teacher's toolkit and they supercharge the learning environment as well.

Addressing more severe behaviors requires expertise and time – two things many classroom teachers lack. A cadre of behavior specialists and counselors should provide direct serve and supports to these

students. The goal shouldn't be to create a behavior plan primarily implemented by the teacher, but to create plans that minimize to the extent possible the time and effort needed by the teacher. Classroom teachers must be part of the solution, but their limited bandwidth and overfilled plates should drive their involvement.

Currently, there are not enough behavior specialists and counselors to meet the need, however. There are a small team of special education behavior specialists and also, a small team of general education behavior specialists.

The caseloads for special education behavioralists are very unequal. Some are assigned to small, high needs programs and others to many schools. For example, one FTE served 30 high needs students while another was expected to support 21 schools.

4c. Align on a common philosophy and create a unified team for behavior support.

If the district creates a cadre of behavior and counseling experts and then clearly divides responsibility between classroom teachers and behavior experts, the implementation will be smoother if:

- The behavior team, process coordinators, school psychologists, counselors, principals and district leaders have a shared vision for effective behavior supports.
- The behavior team is, in fact, one unified team.

Currently there are a wide range of behavior management philosophies in place in the district. Some experts favor a "lagging skills" and prevention-based approach, others are more aligned to an incentives based strategy and others subscribe to a "behavior serves a function" philosophy. Same staff share a mix of these beliefs. Moreover, some principals and staff favor a "tough love and consequences" approach others more of a restorative philosophy.

Emerging research can help the district create a unified approach, but the current range of beliefs will make it hard to scale behavior support.

Finally, behavior support is split amongst multiple departments and teams. This too will make it hard to scale. There is a split between general education and special education and splits within each as well. There is a small team of behavior specialists and school psychologists that can and want to be part of the solution. One psychologist shared that school psychologists are required specifically to support just students with disabilities. Although they are sometimes asked to problem solve a concern raised about a non-disabled student, they are often advised against it by departmental leadership. One school psychologist mentioned feeling "pigeonholed" given the varied skills they can bring to the table. Indeed, they feel their skills are underutilized. On the other hand, school counselors work almost exclusively with the general education population with few collaboration opportunities between them and the school psychologist.

5. Add Role Clarity and Increase Teamwork To Support Students With Special Needs.

As noted in the commendations section, the district utilizes a sophisticated and thoughtful structure to lead and manage the delivery of special education services. The plan includes many best practices often missing in other districts. This includes specialization of staff roles and extensive support for front line teachers. Also commended was the strong leadership of the department and that special education staff feel supported and with good access to special education leaders.

An overview of roles and FTE are on the following pages.

Leadership and Management Staff

Title	FTE	Description
Director of Special Services	1	
Assistant Director of Special Services	1	
School Psychologists	19	
Educational Diagnostician	16	
Secondary Department Chairs	11	Work at the high school level, determine what the IEP process looks like, filter information from the district
District Classroom Coordinators	5	Coordinate district classrooms i.e., RISE, DI, DASI, SWIN, and SSKIP; focus on staff training, curriculum, goals, placement and coordination with families
Process Coordinators	5	Focus on compliance, review IEPs, coordinate services, develop and implement training
Office Staff	4	
Other District Support Coordinators	4	One coordinator each for psychological services, speech and language, motor services, transition
Site Admins	3	Oversee specialized buildings for students with intensive behavioral needs
504 District Supports	2	
Accountant	1	
District Instructional Mentor for Special Services	1	Supports special education teachers in all ways

Staff who Provide Direct Services to Students

Title	FTE
Paraprofessionals	174
K12 Learning Specialists (Special Education Teacher)	148
Speech Language Pathologists	35
Occupational Therapist	11
Physical Therapist	7
Adaptive PE Teachers	6
Special Education Instructional Aids	5
District BCBAs	4
Hearing Specialists	3
Vision Specialists	2
Brailist	1
Audiologist	1
Special Education Social Workers and Outreach Counselors	TBD
Transition Program Staff	TBD

Other Non-Special Education Staff Who Support Students who Struggle

Title	FTE	Description
Reading Recovery Teachers	TBD	provide intensive intervention before special education testing with groups of 1-6 students
School Counselors	TBD	focus on responsive services, SEL support, problem solving, crisis intervention, case manage, and at the elementary level teach SEL classes 1-2 times a week

5a. Greater clarity of roles and decision making rights will improve current structure.

One of the key strengths of the special education organizational structure is that roles are specialized. Some folks, for example, oversee the development of IEPs, others ensure compliance and others support frontline teachers. Too often, however, if disagreements or differences of opinion occur, few are certain who gets to make the final decision. Some staff feel they are being overruled on decisions they feel are theirs to make.

Similarly, when questions or problems arise, many staff reported its unclear who they should seek guidance from. Often, multiple folks weigh in with answer and direction, but often conflicting guidance is provided.

Lastly, the workload of some roles seems much greater than others and the workload for the same role can vary greatly from one level (elementary, middle and high school) to another level.

A partial listing of the challenges posed by insufficient clarity include:

- The district has educational diagnosticians whose primary purpose is to ensure evaluations required for special education eligibility are done with consistency and fidelity across the district, which is a best practice. However, when the school psychologists were asked their primary role in the district, each one mentioned that “evaluation” of students was clearly number one. Each feels primarily responsible for special education evaluations.
- Special education department chairs are a very valuable role, often missing in many districts. They support special education teachers, manage paraprofessionals and keep IEPs on timelines. This role however varies greatly by level and even by person. Some provide direct service to students at the secondary level, but not at the elementary level. Elementary department chairs have a 90% teacher’s load, while secondary have none. This is nearly two full time jobs for the elementary department chairs, all for just a small stipend. One of the five interviewed regularly reviews IEPs, the others do not. Lastly, they are expected to share central office messages, but they seldom understand the why behind decisions.
- Coordinators shared they do not feel they know what is in and out of scope of their roles. They are also not certain who they report to.
- Principals are uncertain in their role for managing district wide special education programs located in their schools. Some find the added responsibility overwhelming.
- Nearly all principals shared they don’t know who to call in central office for specific questions, and they get different answers from different folks.
- Process coordinators shared they feel like the bosses of special education department chairs but it’s not formal. Process coordinators are a great resource for special education teachers but this can conflict with advice and direction from special education department chairs.
- Four people oversee autism services and programs in the district and reportedly they often provide differing direction.
- Special education department chairs feel process coordinators might be their boss, but each of them has different preferences, beliefs and approaches.

5b. Convene an inclusive, facilitated team to clarify roles, responsibilities and decision making rights with special education.

The work life and impact of special educators in the district can be enhanced through a refining of the organizational structure. The overarching structure is good and well aligned with best practices. As they say, the devil is in the details. It is difficult for a small group to see and resolve all the rough spots in current organizational structure.

Convening a working group with representatives from all impacted roles is a first step towards a clearer, smoother functions system. The working group must first identify all the common points of contention, confusion, overlap or uncertainty and then bring clarity to each issue.

An experienced third-party facilitator can be helpful. There can be pressure to leave some decisions vague or to share decision making rights in order to avoid hard decisions or the sense sides are being taken. Absent a great deal of clarity and specificity, it's easy to swap one unclear system for another.

6. Applying An Equity Lens To The Recommendations.

Improving equity is not a separate opportunity but part of every opportunity. This section will highlight a number of equity considerations within the five opportunities.

6a. Improve core instruction through high expectations.

As noted in opportunity 1, well intentioned bias has led many teachers to assume that grade level standards are unreasonable for some students, especially students of color, living in poverty, learning English or having disabilities

6b. Black students are over identified for special education.

They account for 21% of the district enrollment but 31% of students with special needs. Much of this overidentification is for “Other Health Impairment” which is one of the more subjective categories of disability and includes ADHD. The district identifies nearly twice as many black students with “Other Health Impairment” as the national average.

6c. Many of the special education resource room classes are overwhelmingly serving students of color.

Many of the special education pullout support classes were two thirds or three quarters students of color, even though they account for just 37% of the district. Objective entrance and exit criteria and a greater emphasis on general education intervention will be beneficial to students of color.

6d. The approach to problematic behavior disproportionately impacts students of color.

Leadership shared that students of color are 4.5 times more likely to receive an out of school suspension. This reduces their opportunity to learn and can create future discipline challenges as the students fall further behind academically. Improving both tier 1 whole class and tier 3 behavior supports can reduce the need and use of out of school suspension.

Next Steps

The opportunities, as a set, represent a practical path forward to dramatically improve student outcomes. It builds on current strengths and respects past and current efforts already underway. It also respects and acknowledges the pressures general education teachers are feeling from the aftermath of the pandemic. While every opportunity would be beneficial, collectively, they represent a great deal of work and change. It is unlikely that the district has the bandwidth to move forward and implement every recommendation over the next few years. It is better to do a few things well, than many things not so well. In fact, staff are concerned that this report might add to an overfull plate with many asks but little help. Further prioritization is recommended.

Suggested next steps are:

- Share and discuss findings with district leadership
- Share and discuss findings with building leadership
- Share and discuss findings with guiding coalition
- Facilitate a prioritization exercise and first steps