

Comments on District Management Council (Nate Levenson)

Meagan Roy, Ed.D.

Director of Student Support Services, Chittenden South Supervisory Union

Introduction:

I am the Director of Student Support Services for Chittenden South Supervisory Union. CSSU has been engaged in the work of better understanding our multi-tiered system of supports for struggling learners for the better part of a decade. When Nate Levenson presented at the VSBA conference in 2013, our board and central office were intrigued by his work, most notably because of its alignment with the evidence-based practices in which we have grounded our efforts. CSSU contracted with the District Management Council during the 2014-2015 school year and are actively engaged in the process of developing an implementation plan for our MTSS, informed by the DMC findings.

Context for CSSU's Work with DMC:

CSSU has had a long-standing emphasis on ensuring that all students are able to achieve the Mission set forth by our communities and boards. We share a sense of urgency about working together to ensure that our practices are in alignment with what research suggests works to improve outcomes for all students, including those who struggle.

We chose to engage with the DMC in order to inform our ongoing and long-standing efforts to better understand what works for our most struggling learners. We believe their work represented a body of information that, when understood alongside a number of other key pieces of evidence, helps to guide our overall work to improve outcomes for students who are struggling. It does not form the sole basis for our work, but is supportive of where we are going. We found it to be in alignment with evidence based practices in CSSU, in Vermont, and in the field of education as a whole:

- Our introduction to such evidence-based practices began with Michael Giangreco's Numbers that Count research study - for which Williston Central School was a model school. Dr. Giangreco and his colleagues continue to lead the country in providing the field with research about the impact of paraprofessionals on outcomes for students with disabilities.
- CSSU has undergone a significant review of the evidence surrounding best practices in intervention, leading to the development of the CSSU Guiding Principles for Instruction and Intervention. Central in those Guiding Principles is the notion that our most successful service delivery models are those in which our most qualified professionals work with our most tangled learners. This is a very well-known and universally supported understanding in the field of intervention research
- Simultaneously, the AOE commissioned a Study of the Use of Paraprofessionals to Deliver Special Education Services in Vermont Schools (UMass Donahue Institute, 2014).

Opportunities:

CSSU's report from DMC resulted in the identification of six "opportunities" - recommendations for the use of staffing that would (according to their metrics and research) result in improved outcomes for students who struggle and improved efficiencies for our system. Upon receipt of the report, our leadership team engaged in a day-long professional learning session where we examined each opportunity against four metrics:

1. Impact on student learning
2. Ease of implementation
3. Alignment with our CSSU Guiding Principles for Instruction & Intervention

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4. Pacing priority

By synthesizing those results, we have identified the following two opportunities as our highest priority for implementation: 1). Redefine and revise the role and training of special education teachers and intervention professionals; and 2). Redefine and revise the appropriate role for general and special education paraprofessionals. We have found these two recommendations to be most in keeping with our existing work.

As with any outside report, our leadership team puts its own unique lens on the series of recommendations. In some cases, the opportunity outlined in the report did not align fully with the direction of our supervisory union. One such example of this was related to a recommendation to shift the role and function of our school psychologists to include less time on special education assessment and more time working directly in a counseling role with students. Though we agree with the recommendation of rethinking the amount of time spent by psychologists on the special education evaluation process, we have a different perspective on how to use those resources when their time is re-aligned. We have continued existing efforts to allow our psychologists to play a more significant training, consultation and capacity-building role in our MTSS, allowing schools to more effectively meet the needs of students struggling socially and emotionally. This in no way undermined the importance of the report or its merit to our process; it is simply the aligning of our own context and beliefs with those of DMC.

Vermont Legislation & Implications

I believe it is important to highlight two recent areas of focus for the legislature that have had (or could have) a significant impact on our ability to move forward our work, informed by DMC. The first is Act 46 and previous efforts toward consolidation of special education in Act 153/56. Without a consolidated special education system, and the efforts we undertook to transition to that system, we would not have had the leverage needed to truly implement the opportunities outlined in the DMC report. We believe that full consolidation of our entire organization would further improve our efforts.

As you have likely heard many times, however, our special education funding system continues to hamper our efforts towards full implementation of the DMC recommendations for efficiency and effectiveness. Many of the opportunities suggested involve reducing the number of paraprofessionals we employ in special education and reinvesting those funds to bring on additional, non-special education intervention professionals in our system. The loss of special education reimbursement hinders our ability to make these service delivery changes across tiers of our MTSS. A re-examination of our funding structure (as outlined in VCSEA's priorities) is essential to truly realize the implications of the DMC report and other efforts to improve service delivery for struggling learners.