Vermont Agency of Education

Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle

Preliminary Highlights for Discussion

November 2017

District Management Group | Helping Schools and Students Thrive

Contents

Executive Summary

Based on much previous work and analysis in the state's supervisory unions and supervisory districts (SU/SDs), the Agency of Education came to believe that students who struggle both with and without IEPs could be better served. This effort was commissioned by the legislature to both help specific SU/SDs and provide a road map for the state as a whole to more effectively and cost effectively serve students who struggle. The ultimate goal goes well beyond just issuing this report but rather to be a catalyst for a sustained effort to raise achievement, expand services and manage costs.

During the 2016-2017 school year eleven SU/SDs across the state of Vermont elected to participate in a group study to improve the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services provided to students who struggle both with and without IEPs. To understand how students who struggle were supported, as compared to research-based best practices, each SU/SD went through a three-step diagnostic process. During this diagnostic phase, District Management Group (DMGroup) held on-site focus groups and interviews with school and SU/SD leaders, general education staff, and special education staff in each SU/SD. As a second step, extensive data was collected regarding special education referral rates, student assessment results, and staffing levels. As a last step, all staff supporting students both with and without IEPs in each SU/SD were asked to share a typical weekly schedule. Over 1,100 special education teachers, academic interventionists, paraprofessionals, and others shared their weekly schedule. An in-depth analysis was performed to understand how current SU/SD practices compared to the best practices for supporting students who struggle. In May and early June, each SU/SD received a preliminary findings document which assessed each SU/SD's alignment to a best practice support model and key areas for re-alignment.

The group project, sponsored in part by the Vermont Agency of Education, included the following SU/SDs: Addison Central School District, Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union, Chittenden Central Supervisory Union, Essex Town School District, Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, Hartford School District, Milton Town School District, Orange Southwest Supervisory Union, Orleans Central Supervisory Union, Washington West Supervisory Union, Windham Central Supervisory Union.[1]

The SU/SDs across Vermont are focused and committed to ensuring that all students, both with and without IEPs, achieve at high levels and that the needs of all students are being met. The SU/SDs participating in the group study have many strengths to build on. Several key areas of strength emerged during the group project, and below is a list of these commendations.

1. Across all participating SU/SDs staff and building leaders truly put kids first.
2. Many elementary schools have developed a process to identify and place students who struggle into Tier 2 and special education supports.
3. Some elementary schools have developed a special education support model which utilizes special education teacher expertise.
4. Several secondary schools are creating extra time for students who struggle, which is provided by a content strong teacher.

[1] Chittenden Central Supervisory Union and Essex Town School District were studied separately, however a joint report was prepared for the newly merged Essex Westford School District.

The opportunities in this document are based on a comparison of the eleven SU/SD's current practices to best practice research, experiences of school districts that have raise the bar and reduced achievement gaps, and the wisdom of district staff and leaders.

1. **Ensure elementary Tier 1 instruction (Universal Instruction) meets most needs of most students.**

The research is clear: the effectiveness of a teacher has greater impact on student outcomes than any other school based factor, including curriculum, purchased programs or teaching approach. Students who struggle, with and without an IEP, benefit greatly from highly effective teachers. Effective teachers typically have deep expertise in the material they are teaching and support from other highly skilled and effective teachers. For districts with large numbers of students who are not meeting goals, it's not desirable or practical to serve all such students through small group or individual Tier 2 or special education interventions. Many of these students can and must be helped through improvements in primary universal (Tier 1) instruction. A core underpinning of the multi-tiered-system-of-support (MTSS) model is that extra interventions serve 10-15% of students. Across the state of Vermont, approximately 45% of students did not score proficient in ELA on the state assessment grades 3-5 for the 2015-2016 school year. Investing in the effectiveness of core reading instruction is critical for students in general education and students with disabilities, and can ultimately reduce the number of students in Tier 2 and special education reading interventions.

In recent years many elementary schools across Vermont have implemented a tiered system of support under the MTSS framework to provide academic interventions to students who struggle within their school prior to a referral to special education. If a student is struggling, the general education teacher will discuss the student in a reoccurring school-based Education Support Team (EST) meeting. This team decides if the student will receive supports from an academic interventionist, known as Tier 2 supports. If the student does not make sufficient progress in Tier 2 interventions, or they are significantly behind their peers academically, they may be referred for special education testing. If a student has mild-to-moderate disabilities, they will be supported by a special education teacher and most likely a paraprofessional. It was common to hear that many general education teachers did not feel equipped to support learners who struggle, with or without IEPs, specifically those struggling in reading. Teams were quick to turn not to improving primary universal instruction to meet the needs of students who struggle, but rather to support team members. In other words, the primary strategy for supporting students who struggle was to recommend supplementary Tier 2 services. With approximately 37% of students struggling with reading across the participating SU/SDs, many general education teachers, interventionists, and special education teachers described a stressed system in need of more Tier 2 and special education support to meet the needs of struggling readers.

2. **Provide additional instructional time outside of core subjects to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction.**

Districts that have closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students who struggle, including students with mild-to-moderate disabilities, struggling readers and English language learners, provide them with extra instructional time each day to master grade level content. In the elementary years, best practice research indicates that struggling readers need 30 minutes of extra time daily to catch up to their peers reading on grade level. If

students are still behind when they reach the secondary schools (grades 6-12), the research indicates that an additional hour each day is required for successful intervention.

Across all participating elementary schools, a struggling reader who is placed into Tier 2 interventions or special education, will most likely be pulled out of the general education classroom to receive reading support. Across the participating SU/SDs, few reported having clear guidelines for when students who struggle should receive the pull-out services. Further, many teams indicated that complex master building schedules, and lack of clarity regarding when general education teachers would be teaching the reading block, often led to students being pulled out of core reading instruction. Schedule analysis indicated that interventionists pull students out of class 72% of the time, while special education teachers reported that 84% of reading support required by IEPs was provided outside of the general education classroom. Without clear guidelines and complementary scheduling to prevent pulling students out of core literacy instruction, much of this support is occurring in-place-of, rather than in-addition-to core instruction.

Few secondary schools across the group described a cohesive framework that created extra time focused on best practice remediation techniques for students who struggle both with and without IEPs. Most secondary schools offered remedial-level courses once the student entered high school, but these classes were often in place of a standard grade level course, rather than in-addition-to a grade-level course. Students with mild-to-moderate disabilities were most commonly supported by a special education teacher in a resource room, and a special education paraprofessional during core classes. While the resource room may create extra-time for the student, many teams reported that this course did not have a clear focus on remedial best practices, and thus often unintentionally functioned more as a homework help session.

3. Ensure learners who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers.

Just as the content expertise of the general education classroom teacher is critical to high-quality instruction in the regular classroom, it is essential that students who receive extra time and extra help receive this support from staff with deep content and pedagogical knowledge of the subjects they are teaching and who have extensive training and aptitude. For students who struggle to read, research indicates that the subject-specific training of the instructor has significant bearing on the student's likelihood of achieving grade-level mastery.

Each participating SU/SD employed interventionists at the elementary level. Anecdotally, interventionists had a strong background in reading or math, with the training and skills to effectively remediate students. For many students, being placed into a Tier 2 intervention meant access to a skilled reading interventionist, which is aligned with best practices. Students with mild-to-moderate disabilities who struggle with reading may not be supported by teachers skilled in the teaching of reading. While some special education teachers across the SU/SDs had a strong background in the teaching of reading, others indicated that they did not have the training or background to be effective supporting students struggling in reading. However, schedule analysis indicated that, 95% of special education teachers participating in the study support students in reading. Students with mild to moderate disabilities may also be supported by special education paraprofessionals, who generally do not have extensive training in the teaching of reading. Many paraprofessionals discussed their role in the classroom as being fully responsible for academic, social, and behavioral support when a special education teacher was

not available. Schedule analysis supported these focus group conversations, as paraprofessionals reported spending 58% of their time with students focused on academics.

As student needs and the subjects taught become more complex at the secondary level, it is increasingly important to ensure support is provided by individuals who are content experts and who have strong pedagogical content knowledge. At the secondary schools, it was less common to hear of extra-time courses which focused on remediation by a content expert. Many schools schedule students with IEPs into a resource room, which staff noted, was often not thoughtfully scheduled to allow structure and focused time. Special education teachers discussed that in most cases, their caseload varies across many subjects and grades. Within the resource room, they may be expected to support Algebra 1, Biology, and English 9 within the same hour. Fifty-two percent of special education teachers at the secondary schools reported teaching 3 or more core subjects during the course of the week. At the secondary schools, paraprofessionals were also present in the general education classroom and the special education classroom, spending 62% of student time focused on academics. Across SU/SDs, paraprofessionals discussed that at the secondary level the topics becoming more complex, and their ability to answer student questions and support their needs was challenging due to the content. In formulating a SU/SD-wide plan to provide extra time, SU/SDs should consider defining standards and guidelines to ensure all students identified as struggling, including students with and without IEPs, consistently receive additional time with highly skilled teachers.

4. Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on best practice expert support.

There are many roles that are essential in supporting the social-emotional and behavioral needs of students. Creating a system that ensures students are adequately supported requires coordinating these roles in a cohesive way, and developing a model that is proactive rather than reactive. A proactive approach is comprised of four key elements. The first element is that the general education teacher plays a central role by establishing behavior norms in the classroom, and reinforcing behavioral expectations. The second step, is to layer on behavioral expertise for students with more intense behavioral issues. Experts should develop behavior plans for general education staff which identify and avoid student triggers. Third, is to develop a unified effort between behaviorists[2], social/emotional staff, general education teachers, and any special education or paraprofessional staff supporting the students. Developing clear communication plans and developing a unified approach can support both students and staff. Last, is ensuring clear roles and responsibilities between social/emotional and behavioral staff. Developing clear guidelines for when and how to utilize these resources can help increase social/emotional and behavioral staff's availability to support students, while also alleviating confusion for different team players within the school.

All participating SU/SDs identified the rising behavior and social/emotional needs of students as a pressing issue, one that is impacting the quality of learning for students across all schools. Many teams discussed that general education teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with the diverse social/emotional and behavioral needs of the students in their classrooms. Few schools described a clear and cohesive response to behaviors, many noted that resources were limited

[2] In participating districts, staff with the roles "Behaviorists" and BCBA generally were certified staff members. Team members listed as "behavior interventionists" were most commonly paraprofessionals focused on behavior support but not certified behaviorists.

and teams were unsure how to gain access to expertise. In many cases behavioral issues, regardless of if the student has and IEP, fell to a paraprofessional in the classroom. Across the group, paraprofessionals reported spending 22% of their time with students focused on behavior support. Further, few paraprofessionals reported collaborating regularly with the special education teacher, behaviorist, or classroom teacher regarding how to proactively support student behaviors. As such, many teams noted that paraprofessionals were often called upon to handle student crisis with little to no training. Many teams shared the perception that school psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors and contracted mental health experts were only accessible if the student had an IEP, and were unsure how to gain access to this support. Across the group, school and SU/SD leadership could create proactive response models, utilizing shared staff expertise to create a cohesive response to rising student behavior and social/emotional needs.

5. Provide students with more intensive support needs specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts.

Best practice research indicates that inclusion in the general education classroom can also be beneficial for students with more intensive support needs.[3] For this to be successful, it requires developing collaborative teamwork between general education teachers, special education teachers, related services providers, and paraprofessional staff to ensure the student is meaningfully included and instructed in the general education classroom lessons and activities with age-peers while also receiving necessary supports. For students with more intensive support needs, it can be beneficial to define what skills will most benefit the student, including academic, communication, social, vocational, and functional life skills. Successful inclusive models for educating students with more intensive support needs share the common trait that all staff work together to address the needs of the student through meaningful and supported instruction throughout the school day within shared activities with classmates.

Due to small school size (50 – 250 students), the current support model for students with more intensive support needs at the elementary schools often relies heavily upon the use of paraprofessional staff. While inclusion in the classroom can be beneficial for students with more intensive support needs, anecdotally, their access to general education activities was limited – leading to students being in the classroom, but not necessarily included in classroom activities or learning. In the full inclusion model for students with more intensive support needs, staff discussed that often the paraprofessional was primarily responsible for the academic, social, and emotional support of the students while in the classroom. Most larger elementary schools in the study (250 – 500 students) as well as secondary schools were able to create more specialized programs to support students with more intensive needs. These schools had specific programming for students with instruction focused on developing independence, which they would receive for several hours a day from a special education teacher. Often, paraprofessionals accompanied students into the general education classroom for several subjects or elective courses, to facilitate Vermont's inclusion practices. While some schools had elements of a best practice model in place, many support models places a great emphasis on support from, and reliance on, paraprofessionals to support the students. Across all school levels (k-12), SU/SDs have an opportunity to examine the use of paraprofessionals in its inclusion model for students

[3] The American Association on Intellectual Disabilities encourages practitioners to consider the intensity of support needs when discussing and determining support models. The term "intensive needs" is typically referred to as "more severe needs." For the purposes of this discussion, the term "intensive needs" will be used.

with more intensive needs, ensuring they are truly facilitating student learning and independence.

Implications and next steps

It was clear across all participating SU/SDs that staff were committed to supporting all students. This commitment often manifested in providing students with more supports either through time with an interventionist, a special education teacher, or a paraprofessional. If schools participating in the project relied on intervention as the primary support model for students who struggle, it would require supporting 30-45% of their students through Tiers 2 and special education. Due to current operational practices and a reliance on support staff to help when many students begin to struggle, the systems in place relies heavily on support staff to help students who struggle. Many of these students can and must be helped through improvements in primary universal (Tier 1) instruction. To align the current systems with a best practice approach, there is an opportunity to strengthen core classroom instruction to meet most needs of most students, then thoughtfully layer on a best practice support model focused on extra time with experts, for students that need additional support.

Many of the opportunities described involve utilizing current expertise found in the SU/SDs and realigning current systems, schedules, caseloads, and building assignments to align with staff expertise. For example, many schools across the participating SU/SDs could reduce the amount of pull-out support from interventionists and special education teachers by aligning key decision-making processes, and developing SU/SD wide guidelines aligned to best practice. At the elementary level if master schedules were developed with struggling learners in mind, school leadership could create a school schedule that facilitated an extra 30 minutes each day, scheduled at a time when a reading interventionist, or special education teacher skilled in the background of reading was available. A similar approach could be taken at the secondary level, by ensuring that the course offerings for students who struggle with and without IEPs is structured to ensure the students can maintain enrollment in grade level courses, while receiving remedial support.

Aligning SU/SDs to a best practice support model would not cost more, in fact, it would either be cost neutral or cost less than current practices. Participating SU/SDs have invested significant resources into supporting students who struggle, many of which are paraprofessional staff. In the participating SU/SDs 66% (628 FTE) of staff supporting students who struggle were paraprofessionals, 27% (254 FTE) were special education teachers, and 7% (63 FTE) were licensed interventionists. Shifting to a best practice model would require aligning hiring practices to ensure that new staff are highly skilled in the area in which they will be teaching, while also restructuring current support models to align with staff strengths, background and expertise.

A shift to this model typically takes 1-3 years of close planning, research, and communication. Many SU/SDs will require additional outside support to build capacity and support the shifts in current practices.

Introduction

Supervisory unions and school districts (SU/SDs) across Vermont are focused and committed to ensuring that all students, both with and without IEPs, achieve at high levels and that the needs of all students are being met. In this spirit, eleven SU/SDs requested to participate in a group study to improve the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services for students who struggle, both with and without IEPs. The effort is part of a group study sponsored in part by the Vermont Agency of Education. The participating SU/SDs are as follows: Addison Central School District, Bennington Rutland Supervisory Union, Chittenden Central Supervisory Union, Essex Town School District, Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, Hartford School District, Milton Town School District, Orange Southwest Supervisory Union, Orleans Central Supervisory Union, Washington West Supervisory Union, Windham Central Supervisory Union.[4] This work is conducted under the continuous improvement framework. It assumes all organizations can improve and build upon current strengths.

During the initial diagnostic phase, detailed information was gathered on current practices in each of the eleven SU/SDs through conversations with school and SU/SD leaders, general and special education staff, extensive data collection, school visits and a deep look at how staff serve students and use their time. During the on-site visits, over 80 focus groups were held across the eleven SU/SDs. Additionally, over 1,100 special educators, interventionists, paraprofessionals and others shared a typical week's schedule via an online tool in late March or early April.

The goal is to create a common knowledge of how students who struggle are being served across the state of Vermont. Each SU/SD received individual findings prior to the end of the school year in May or June of 2017.[5] Within the preliminary findings, six best practices for supporting struggling students both with and without IEPs were discussed, along with the SU/SD's alignment to the best practices, and key areas for re-alignment.

The opportunities are based on a comparison of the eleven SU/SD's practices with best practice research, experiences of school districts that have raised the bar and reduced achievement gaps, and the wisdom of district staff and leaders. A short list is better than a long list and not all areas identified for further consideration can be addressed at once or quickly. It typically takes 1-3 years of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out, with a commitment from the leadership to provide focus and stability throughout the implementation phase. Many of the SU/SDs will need, and some have requested, additional support to shift current practices to a best practice model.

Please note that each individual student is unique, and nothing in these findings should suggest otherwise. Student needs are personal and individual, and services and supports must be personalized as well. Some of the opportunities are appropriate for students with mild to moderate disabilities and students who struggle without disabilities, but not appropriate for students with more intensive disabilities or with autism. All recommendations and guidance outlined in this document should be considered in light of specific student needs.

[4] CCSU and ETSD were studied separately, however a joint report was prepared for the merged Essex Westford SD.
[5] Dr. Michael Giangreco worked collaboratively with DMGroup as an advisor/thought partner/critical friend while he simultaneously maintained an independent voice in terms of feedback to DMGroup staff, the Vermont Agency of Education, and participating SU/SDs. All written documents are exclusively the conclusions and recommendations of DMGroup; therefore no agreement or disagreement by Dr. Giangreco or the University of Vermont should be inferred based merely on his participation in the project.

Commendations

The SU/SDs participating in the group project have many strengths to build on. Below is a short list of highlights to commend areas of strength that can serve as a foundation for continuous improvement.

1. **Across all participating SU/SDs staff and building leaders truly put kids first.**

The SU/SDs that participated in the group project geographically spanned the entire state, yet a central theme came through in each of the focus groups with staff and leaders - the teams went to great lengths to support the students in their schools. It was common to hear of principals leading a reading group if formal supports were lacking, and staff going "above and beyond" their standard job duties to support students by coming in before and after school hours, staying late for team meetings, and constantly examining how to improve their own teaching practices while also supporting their teammates. Many teams described a dedication to supporting the whole child, providing academic as well as social-emotional support and coordinating community services. Staff and building leaders were highly dedicated to their school communities and showed a willingness to do "whatever it takes" to support their students and ensure they have a positive and fulfilling school experience.

2. **Many elementary schools have developed a process to identify and place students who struggle into Tier 2 and special education supports.**

Most elementary school across the group could articulate a process that was in place to identify and support students who struggle, both with and without IEPs. While the models varied school to school, teams noted a recent focus on quickly providing resources and support to students struggling academically. Often, teams discussed the best practice framework of first providing 6-8 week targeted interventions within the general education classroom, then brainstorming alternatives with a broader team if the student continued to struggle. Most elementary schools participating in the study had an Education Support Team (EST) in place, which operated as a group of general education teachers, special education teachers, social/emotional support staff and often the principal to monitor student progress and offer continued support to academic and behavioral interventions. Within the current intervention framework, teams across the state described this specific area as central to the success of their students, and a willingness to improve the process.

3. **Some elementary schools have developed a special education support model which utilizes special education teacher expertise.**

In a handful of elementary schools participating in the study, school and SU/SD leadership have developed a student support model which incorporates the idea of teacher "expertise" into staffing decisions which is aligned with both research based best practices and the state's Multi-Tiered-System-of-Supports framework. In these elementary schools principals divided the responsibilities of special education teachers to focus on either specific academic content, or social/emotional topics when supporting students. This focus is aligned with their training and background, and allows staff to specialize and support students in a topic in which they have expertise, rather than spanning multiple subjects and grades. In several elementary schools, this meant special education teachers dividing math and reading support so that they could align lessons and planning to reinforce and support the general education content. In a separate elementary school, special education teachers divided academic support from social/emotional

behavior support to align with training and specialty. In both cases, teams noted a greater ability to provide more targeted support when aligned to their strengths, and a greater ability to collaborate and plan with the general education teams. This support model allowed special education teachers to expand their ability to reach students by aligning their student support model with their skills and background.

4. **Several secondary schools are creating extra time for students who struggle, which is provided by a content strong teacher.**

Several middle and high schools across the SU/SDs had a best practice model in place, which focused on creating extra time outside of core content classes, with a content expert. At one specific junior/high school, students that arrive significantly behind in reading are provided intensive 1:1 support with a reading expert each day in place of an elective. The goal of this program is aligned with the best practice model, as the instructor has the course designed to focus on missing foundational skills, reinforcing current material, and extensively utilizing data and assessments to monitor the students' progress. The program is focused on remediation, and more specifically – on exiting the student from the course once sufficient progress has been made. In a second middle school, daily extra time courses are provided in both reading and math for students that are significantly behind when entering the middle school grades. The programs, which are taught by content experts are available to students both with and without IEPs. These courses have a similar focus on progress monitoring with clear entrance and exit criteria into and out of the program. In both cases, the secondary schools offer daily extra time options for students who struggle. These programs are taught by content experts (teachers with a strong background in the teaching of reading or math), occur each day, and have a relentless focus on utilizing data to ensure students are making progress. Each program has the goal of exiting the student at the quarter or semester marker, rather than remaining in the intervention for multiple years.

Recommendations

1. Ensure elementary Tier 1 instruction (Universal Instruction) meets most needs of most students.

Best Practice

The research is clear: the effectiveness of a teacher has greater impact on student outcomes than any other school based factor, including curriculum, purchased programs or teaching approach.[6] Students who struggle, those both with and without IEPs, benefit greatly from teachers who are highly effective teachers with strong pedagogical knowledge, which typically requires deep expertise in the material they are teaching and support from other highly skilled and effective teachers. Since most students who struggle, including students with mild-to-moderate special needs, spend the majority of their day in the general education setting it's critical that general education teachers and instruction meet much of their learning needs.

It was common to hear that many general education teachers did not feel equipped to support learners who struggle, with or without IEPs, specifically those struggling in reading. Teams were quick to turn not to improving primary universal instruction to meet the needs of students who struggle, but rather to support team members. In other words, a common strategy for supporting students who struggle was to recommend supplementary Tier 2 services. A core underpinning of the Multi-Tiered-System-of-Supports (MTSS) model is that extra interventions serve 10-15% of students. Across the state of Vermont, approximately 45% of students did not score proficient in ELA on the state assessment grades 3-5 for the 2015-2016 SY.[7]

Of all the factors that drive student performance over which education systems have control, teacher quality is by far the most important. Even for students with mild-to-moderate disabilities, who receive some of their academic support from special education teachers, the majority of their instruction time is typically from a general education teacher. Investing in the effectiveness of core instruction is critical for students in general education and students with disabilities as any investments in the quality of primary instruction benefits all students. In fact, on a national basis, the states with the highest-achieving students with disabilities tend to be those who also have the highest achievement for general education.

Coaching is a high-leverage way to support teachers in becoming more effective teachers and meeting the needs of their students. The effectiveness of instructional coaching stems largely from its ability to be highly customized, which can create faster and deeper insights for teachers about what can work in their classroom.

Research has demonstrated that while coaching is not required for teachers to learn a new skill, it dramatically increases the likelihood that teachers will actually use the newly gained skill in the classroom. Further research has established a link between reading gains and intensive coaching programs that are implemented effectively by targeted staff.

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[6] All citations and research associated with specific best practices can be found in the appendix of the document.
[7] The Smarter Balanced (SBAC) 2015-2016 SY State and School Level Assessment data collected from Vermont's Agency of Education's website: http://education.vermont.gov/documents/data-smarter-balanced-state-school-level-2016

Current Practices

A note on the differing definitions of Multi-Tiered-Systems-of-Supports (MTSS):

The state of Vermont has adopted a comprehensive MTSS framework that emphasizes the importance of first teaching and effective early intervention practices for both academic and behavior support. The model is reliant on five components: systemic and comprehensive approach, effective collaboration, high quality instruction and intervention, comprehensive and balanced assessment, and well-designed professional expertise. Several of the participating SU/SDs are formally participating in implementing this cohesive framework, however it is important to note that in many of the schools participating in the study, the term MTSS is used to indicate the process in which students are identified and placed into Tier 2 academic interventions which is a much more narrow definition than what is put forward by the state. Many districts referred to this process as "Tier 2", and some as response to intervention (RTI). For the purposes of this document, when we use the term "MTSS" we refer to the cohesive framework, with "tiered interventions" to describe the identification of students who struggle academically and subsequent supports.

In recent years many elementary schools across Vermont have implemented a tiered system of support within the Multi-Tiered-System-of-Supports (MTSS) framework to provide academic interventions to students who struggle within their school prior to a referral to special education. Schools are in different stages of implementing the cohesive framework, however many had elements of the identification and intervention process recommended within the broader MTSS framework.

Each SU/SD participating in the group project discussed an evolving tiered system of support for identifying and supporting students who struggle in their elementary schools. When a student is struggling academically, especially with reading, teams across the group had similar models in place regarding the response to intervention practices in their schools.

When a student initially begins to struggle, the general education teacher is expected to attempt an in-class targeted intervention. These interventions typically last 6-8 weeks. If the student continues to struggle, the general education teacher may request to discuss alternative intervention strategies for the student during an Education Support Team (EST) meeting. Most schools in the group project had a standing EST meeting to discuss students struggling academically. The EST was often comprised of a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a social emotional support team member (guidance, social worker, school psychologist), interventionist and often the principal. At these meetings, the EST brainstorms interventions, which the general education teacher is expected to integrate into the classroom lessons for another cycle of 6-8 weeks. After the second intervention cycle, it is suggested that the student's progress be revisited and discussed by the EST. The teams discussed that at this point, the student will either be exited (if sufficient progress is made), or the team will discuss possible Tier 2 interventions, which often leads to time with a reading or math interventionist.[8] If the

[8] Regarding role classification: across the participating SU/SDs interventionists includes licensed teachers that are supporting students in reading or math interventions. Focus groups across SU/SDs indicated that these practitioners were highly skilled in the teaching of reading, and also include teachers funded by Title 1 that focus on Tier 2 reading interventions. Several SU/SDs employed "behavior interventionists" and "academic interventionists" that were un-certified and functioned as a paraprofessional. These staff members have been included in the paraprofessional staffing figures.

student continues to struggle, or has a significant knowledge gap from his/her peers, the student may be referred for special education testing.

There were several points of variation both across the group and even within SUs. The frequency of EST meetings often varied school to school. Some teams met weekly, some monthly, many described on an "as needed" basis. Teams noted that often EST meetings decreased in frequency as the school year progressed due to the other meetings gaining priority. This discussion was often followed by a conversation on the EST process as "red tape," and the difficulty of getting students support by interventionists. As meetings decrease in occurrence after the fall months, it is more difficult to get students who struggle placed with an interventionist for reading support. It was common to hear that often there was a long list of student names on the agenda for EST discussion, and a shared perception that it may take months to get a student's name on the agenda. Schedule analysis indicated that in a typical week mid-school year, elementary special education teachers only spend 1% of their time in EST meetings, with interventionists not reporting any time dedicated to this meeting type across the 11 participating SU/SDs during the week of data collection.

Additionally, there was significant variation in the expectation of the use of data in making decisions at the EST meeting. In some cases, teachers were expected to bring detailed data to the EST on the interventions that had been attempted, as well as the outcomes. In other cases, it was acceptable to base student needs on purely anecdotal information and classroom observations. Teams also varied significantly in progress monitoring across all stages of the intervention process. Only two participating SUs had a clear focus on using data to drive intervention cycles with clear entrance and exit criteria.

There were several important sentiments shared across many schools regarding the support of learners who struggled. Namely, it was common to hear that often the EST meetings functioned more as a professional development opportunity, and that many of the intervention approaches discussed were just "good Tier 1 practices that could benefit all students in the classroom." Further, it was also common to hear that general education teachers did not feel they had the skills, training, or background to effectively support the students in their classes that were falling behind. Many teams noted that currently, the EST process is perceived as a way to gain access to resources and receive classroom help rather than a system to remediate a small group of students who struggle and reduce the number of students requiring special education supports. Instead, teams discussed that often general education teachers see the EST as a necessary process for access to Title 1 or special education services.

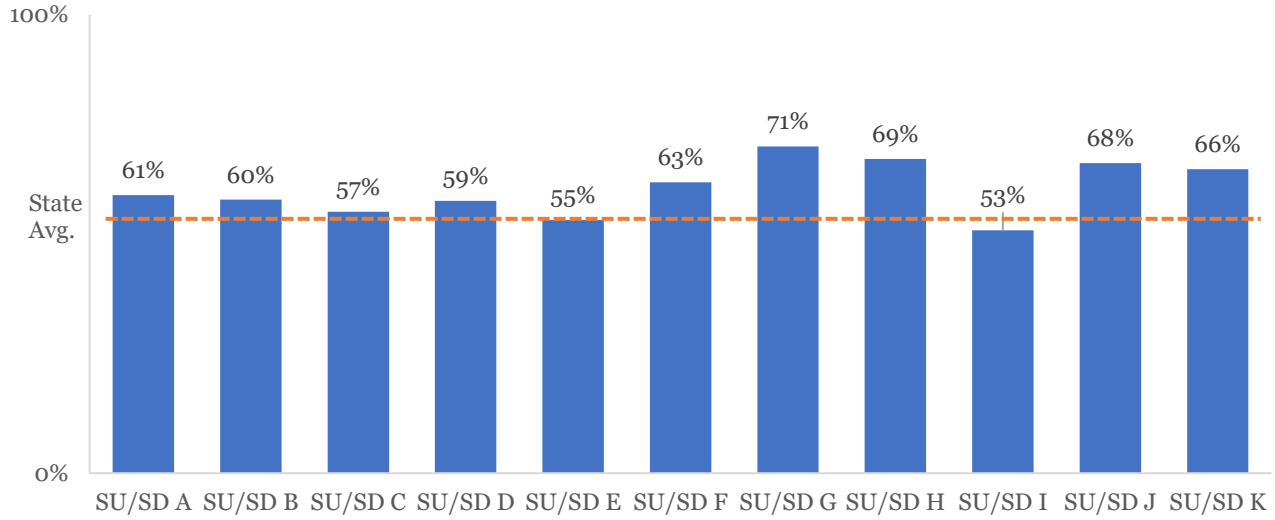
It was common to hear that general education teachers viewed the Tier 2 and special education staff members as more qualified to support students who are struggling. There was a shared perception in many SU/SDs that interventionists, special education teachers, and special education paraprofessionals were better able to support students struggling in reading than the general education teacher. Very few districts discussed a reflective process to understand the weaknesses in the current Tier 1 general education classroom support. Instead, they described a stressed system in need of more interventionists, more special education teachers and more paraprofessionals to meet the current needs of students.

The 2015-2016 state-wide Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) results indicated that approximately 45% of 3rd – 5th graders did not score proficient in English Language Arts. While implementing a tiered system of supports to help learners who struggle is important to

ensure students can read, it would be difficult and cost prohibitive to provide individual intervention and special education support to 45% of the elementary school population in Vermont. It is recommended that the focus shift to ensuring that general education teachers have the skills, training, and background to effectively support learners who struggle at the first signs of difficulty. As a group, the weighted average[9] of students testing proficient in ELA grades 3-5 was 8 points higher than the state average, with a weighted group average of 63% of students testing proficient or above. Thirty-seven percent of students struggled to meet this benchmark in the 2015-2016 school year.

SU/SD Weighted Average English Language Arts SBAC 2015-2016 SY

Grades 3, 4, 5 (All Students With and Without IEPs)



- The weighted average percentage of students testing proficient or above on the English Language Arts SBAC test for the group of participating districts was 63%.
- The state average of students testing proficient or above on the SBAC was 55%. This number includes students with and without IEPs.[10]

Building on the concept of strong Tier 1 support, focus groups across SUs did not all indicate a consistent and clear SU-wide focus on the importance of reading in the elementary schools in direct relation to best practices associated with early intervention. Best practice research indicates that an unrelenting focus on reading is critical, as it can impact student learning in other subjects as well.

SU leadership often discussed that decisions regarding literacy block duration, format, and curriculum were left to the school based leadership teams. The school-based leadership teams indicated that often general education teachers were given loose guidelines for duration of literacy block and very rarely given guidelines (outside of a curriculum recommendation) for how to structure the direct instruction. School leaders often discussed that there was not always adherence to the literacy guidelines that were set. This was emphasized in focus groups with staff, as few teams described the literacy block at any elementary grades as longer than 60

[9] A weighted average indicates that each student's score was counted equally, regardless of SU/SD size. In a simple average, the test results from a small SU/SD would carry equal weight as a larger SU/SD.
[10] This figure is for all students, both with and without IEPs.

minutes. Only one school directly mentioned a best practice 90-minute reading block, however it was not present across all grades. It was more common for teams to say the duration of time dedicated to literacy varied by both teacher preference, and by day.

Often, when SU/SDs discussed a "focus on early literacy" it directly described the deployment of resources and programs, rather than the intentional use of general education classroom direct instruction time. Many districts mentioned that when Tier 2 supports were limited, they focused what resources were available in grades 1 and 2. While providing students struggling in reading with content strong interventionists is aligned with best practices, it should be one piece of the solution rather than the sole focus of the program. In the absence of a strong tiered-system-of-supports that is anchored in clear entrance and exit criteria, it is common for students to remain in interventions for years. Many teams discussed that students may get labeled "Tier 2" kids or "Title 1" kids, referring to a tiered-system-of-support that relies heavily on resources to support students that are struggling for long periods of time, without an expectation of exiting the program.

Conversations with the interventionists across the group indicated they were eager to build a reading program that allowed more students to be supported in the general education classroom so their services could be reserved for students with greater reading challenges. Many interventionists were quick to describe a need for more coaching services for general education teachers, and a more focused approach to building a strong elementary reading program to reduce the number of students receiving interventions. By contrast, general education teams often discussed the need for more reading interventionists to support the growing reading needs of their students.

Many elementary schools across the participating SU/SDs were utilizing the Reading Recovery (RR) program to support first graders that were entering first grade from kindergarten significantly behind in reading. This program typically operates outside of the EST process. Typically, placement into RR was decided prior to the start of the school year based on previous year's assessment. The program is provided in a one-on-one setting typically with a teacher trained in the RR program. Since the program must be taught one-on-one, it is resource heavy with typically 1-4 first graders eligible for the program each semester. Anecdotally, teams described that this program was a "great success" and teams were more likely to describe regular progress monitoring of student growth as it related to the program than it was described in other interventions. If the number of students eligible for the program outnumber the available spots, those students will most likely be placed into a reading group with an interventionist or paraprofessional until a spot opened up in the program. Many teams discussed that the Reading Recovery program was reliant on regular assessments and progress monitoring, with students often exiting at the mid-year mark and new students entering the programs.

Application:

SU/SD leadership could consider building a SU/SD-wide program with a relentless focus on ensuring all students can read. Many conversations indicated that staff are quick to turn to more resources as an answer rather than to a school wide discussion on how to improve the possible deficits in the current reading program. To reduce the number of students requiring additional reading support, the program requires a strong foundation built on clear guidelines, expectations, and support to implement a program and ingrain the importance of reading in school, district, and supervisory union culture.

2. Provide additional instructional time outside of core subjects to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction.

Districts that have closed the achievement gap and significantly raised the achievement of students who struggle, including students with mild-to-moderate disabilities, struggling readers and English language learners, provide them with extra instructional time each day to master grade level content.

Some students simply require more time to master the content than others. Richard DuFour's ground-breaking work put it best: learning should be the constant and time the variable.

Providing extra time to struggling learners both with and without IEPs applies to students at both the elementary and secondary level, however the recommended support model plays out slightly differently. In the elementary years, best practice research indicates that struggling readers need 30 minutes of extra time daily to catch up to their peers reading on grade level. If students are still behind when they reach the secondary schools (grades 6-12), the research indicates that an additional hour each day is required for successful intervention.

Best Practice: Elementary

Elementary reading is an integral part of building a foundation for all learning and a crucial area of focus when addressing the needs of many students who struggle. Reading is the gateway to all other learning and the implications for students who do not master reading at the elementary level reverberate throughout other subjects and for years to follow. Writing, social studies, and science cannot be mastered without strong reading skills. Even Common Core Math is full of word problems; reading and math success are highly correlated. Students who struggle to read on grade level often need more time for reading instruction in order to catch up and keep up with their peers. For students who struggle in reading at the elementary level, extra time is crucial to reshaping their educational trajectories.

An overwhelming majority of students who have not mastered reading by the end of third grade will continue to struggle with reading throughout high school. These students tend to have increased rates of behavioral problems in later grades and are less likely to graduate high school or enroll in college. Specifically, a national study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that, of students who were not reading on grade level by 3rd grade, four times as many failed to graduate high school on time compared with peers who did read proficiently by 3rd grade. For students who were both living in poverty and reading below grade-level in 3rd grade, 13 times as many of these students failed to graduate on time compared with their proficient, wealthier peers.

Not all students will master this critical skill as quickly as their peers. Research has shown that this is true for most students who struggle, both with and without IEPs. In an effective intervention framework, at least 30 minutes a day of additional reading instruction is typically required for struggling elementary readers to catch up. Careful planning and scheduling can help ensure that reading intervention support is over and above the time dedicated to the instruction provided in the core literacy block and not in place of it.

Current Practices: Elementary

Due to the many different school-grade configurations, elementary discussions include the school practices and corresponding data for schools supporting grades K-5, K-6, and K-8.

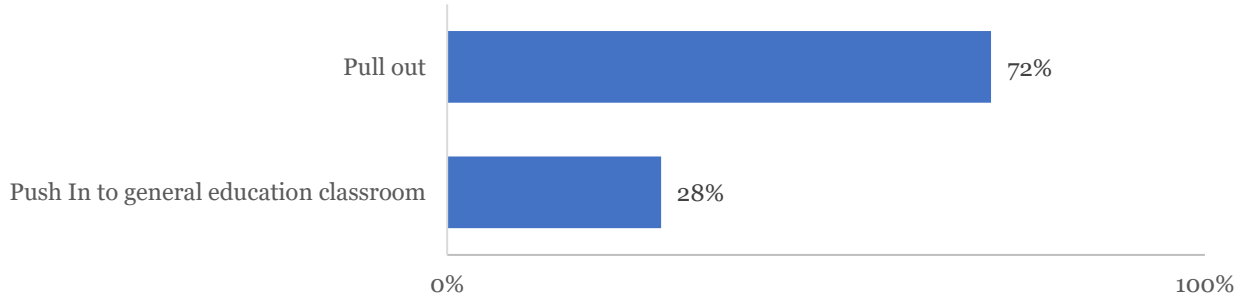
The elementary schools in the participating SU/SDs shared many similarities regarding their approach to supporting struggling readers both with and without IEPs. As discussed in the first section, students that are struggling with reading are typically identified by classroom teachers and discussed during school-based EST meetings. If the team determines that the student's needs meet their criteria to receive interventions, the student will often be assigned to the caseload of an interventionist.

Many elementary schools across the participating SU/SDs leave the daily classroom schedule at the discretion of the general education teacher. Often, principals will provide a schedule outlining when different specials will be offered such as art, PE, or foreign language. Additionally, the principals also determine the lunch and recess schedule for the school. While there are many variations in terms of the level of scheduling detail the principals provided, few schedules included daily additional time for reading intervention or enrichment (typically called an I/E block or What I Need (WIN) time, outside of the literacy block. When a master schedule is not available, schools commonly rely upon the interventionist and general education teacher to determine when a student (or students) should be pulled-out from class.

Many teams discussed that few guidelines existed across the elementary schools regarding when students should receive intervention support. It was common to hear that Tier 2 interventions are often provided by pulling the student out of class during the literacy block while other students are working independently, or with the classroom teacher. Intervention teams were quick to note that while it was not ideal for students to miss reading, this was commonly the only time during the day that the student could be pulled from class. Schedule analysis of interventionists at the elementary school indicated that across the group, 72% of interventionist's time spent with students is pulling students out of class.

Time Spent in Settings

Interventionists (Elementary)[11]



- In a typical week, interventionists pull students out of class for support 72% of their total time with students, sometimes instead of core instruction.

[11] Data includes interventionist staff funded through Title 1.

- Approximately 28% of Tier 2 support occurs in the classroom, which seldom was "extra time."

In a best practice model, students struggling in reading would receive an additional 30 minutes each day in addition to, not in place of, the literacy block. While pull-out support itself is not misaligned with best practices, providing guidance and time for staff to deliver the interventions outside of the literacy block is the key to ensuring that interventions do not occur during core subjects. Several elementary schools have elements of this best practice in place, with a handful of principals scheduling 25-30 minute I/E blocks during the week. However, many teams noted that this I/E block did not occur each day.

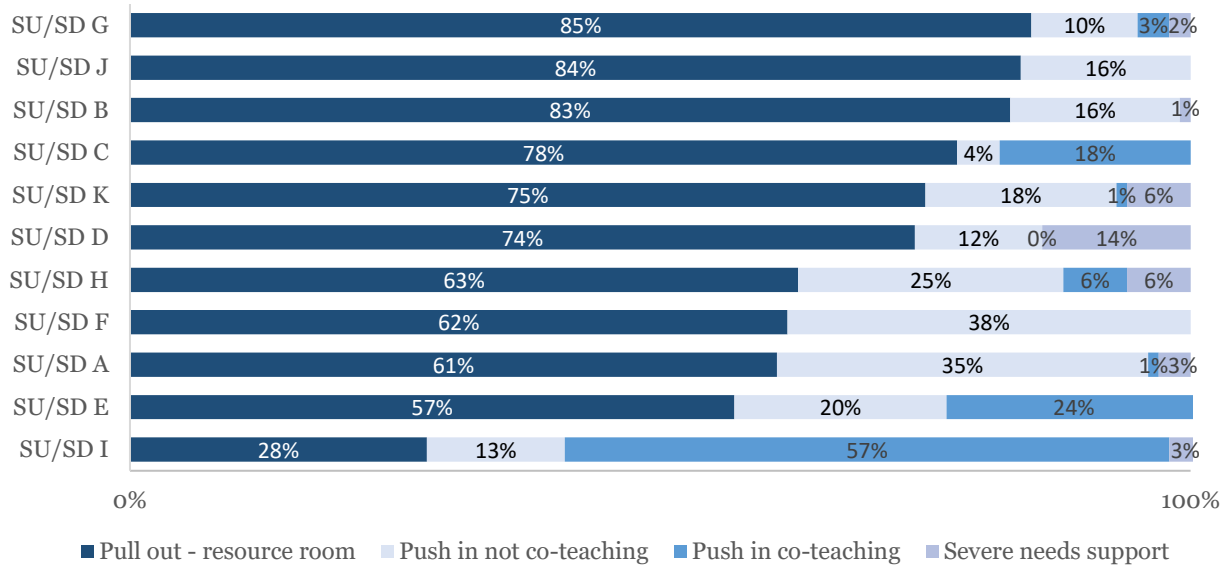
For students who struggle with mild-to-moderate disabilities, the special education support model was similar across schools. Many teams described a combination of pushing-in to class, possibly in a co-teaching capacity, however the more common model was pulling the student out of the class. Similar to interventionists, the special education teachers typically coordinated with the general education teacher to determine the best time to pull the students. Teams noted that the further behind a student was in reading, the more likely he or she was to be pulled from the literacy block.

It was also common to hear that while several schools had intervention blocks in place, these were typically not aligned with the realities of the special education teacher's caseload, making it difficult to utilize the extra time block. Further, while it was common to hear that interventionists may have set support model guidelines for their team regarding when and how students would be supported, few special education teams indicated a presence of SU-wide guidance for pull-out services. As opposed to interventionists, the teams often described that there was an effort to align the need of the student (math, reading, science, etc.) with when the student would be pulled-out from the general education classroom. In many cases, focus groups described a support model in which students with IEPs were pulled out of the general education classroom for academic support often multiple times a day.

Schedule analysis indicated that across the group, most special education teachers spent between 57 – 85% of their time with students in a pull-out setting. The weighted average of pull-out support is 64% of direct student time across the group. The outlier (SU/SD I) relies primarily on a co-teaching model, which aligns with the low pull-out support number.

Time Spent in Settings

Special Education Teachers (Elementary)[12]

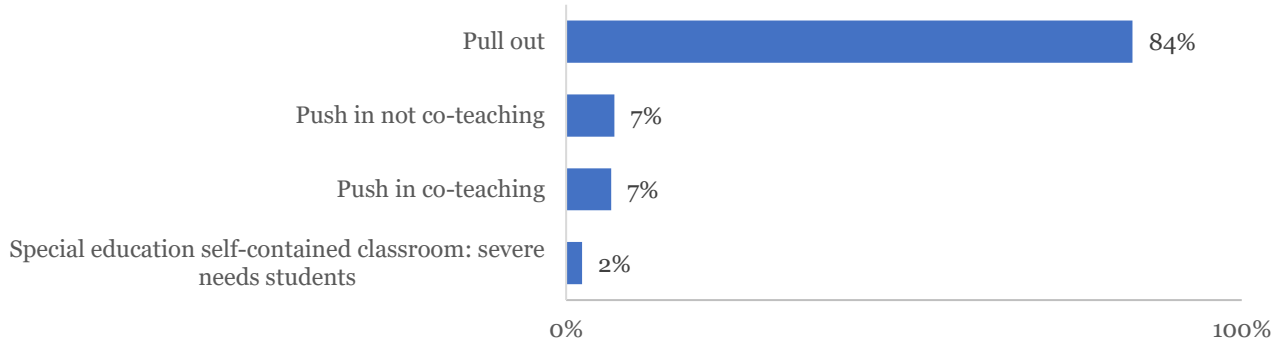


- In all but one participating district, special education teachers primarily rely upon a pull-out support model when supporting students.
- In a weighted average, special education teachers support students 64% of direct service time in a pull-out setting.
- In SU/SD I, students are primarily served in a co-teaching setting.

Specifically, special education teachers reported that 84% of direct reading support provided to students with IEPs was provided as a pull-out service.

Time Spent in Settings Providing Reading Support

Special Education Teachers (Elementary)[13]



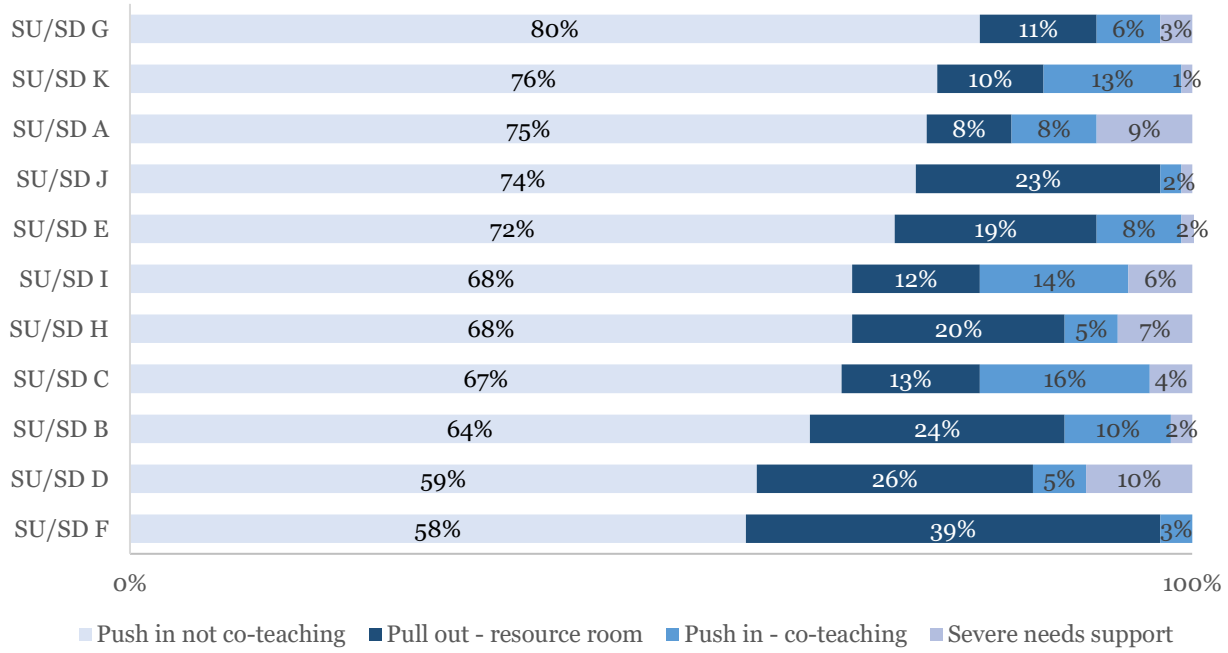
[12] Due to Vermont's full inclusion model, it was not always possible to delineate between teachers providing support to students with mild-to-moderate and those with severe needs. As such the data may contain some time dedicated to supporting students with more severe needs.
[13] May include data for support special education teachers provide to students with severe needs.

- Special education teachers pull students out of class to deliver reading support 84% of the time.

Many schools also noted a reliance on paraprofessional staff for in-class academic and behavioral support. It was common to hear from SU/SD leadership that the role of the paraprofessional while in the general education classroom was to keep the student on task, not to provide academic support. However, focus group discussions with school-based staff described the responsibilities of the paraprofessionals differently. Conversations indicated that across the participating SU/SDs, the paraprofessional was expected to provide hands-on academic support to students with IEPs in the classroom. Often this means working one-on-one with the student to deliver mini-lessons, re-teach lessons, and help with assignments. Many teachers described that the perceived role of the paraprofessional was to fully support the student academically, socially, and emotionally. Schedule analysis aligned with the level of support described in focus groups, as paraprofessionals across the participating SU/SDs reported spending a weighted average of 77% of their time with students pushing-in to the general education classroom, and 19% pulling students out to provide one-on-one or small group support.

Time Spent in Settings

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Elementary)[14]



- Across all participating districts, the majority of time paraprofessionals spent with students was in the general education classroom.
- The weighted average of in-class support was 77% of direct student time.

[14] Due to Vermont's full inclusion model, it was not always possible to delineate between paraprofessionals providing support to students with mild-to-moderate and those with severe needs. As such the data may contain some time dedicated to supporting students with more severe needs.

Application:

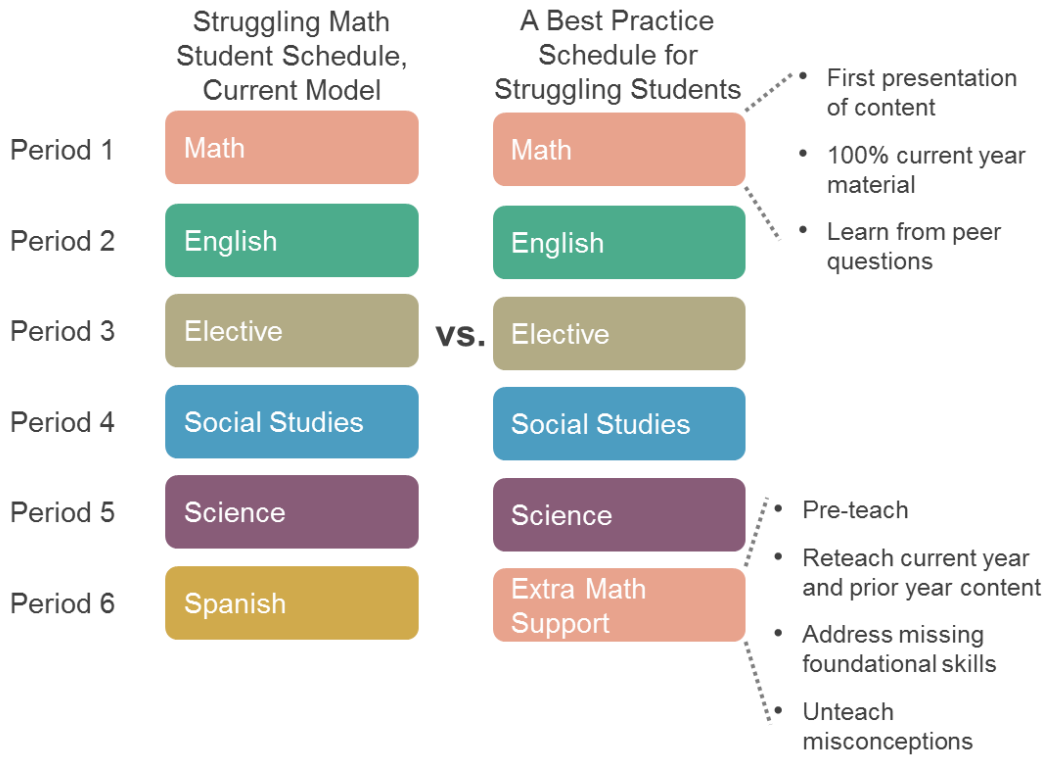
Many SU/SDs could benefit from facilitating a master building schedule that creates extra time outside of the literacy block to support best practice interventions for struggling readers. Further, the districts should consider the role of paraprofessionals while in the classroom to ensure responsibilities as it pertains to academic support are clear to both the general education teacher, special education teacher and school leadership.

Best Practices: Secondary

Tier 2 and special education intervention at the secondary level typically require an extra hour a day to catch up and master grade level content to make up for prior lost years. Providing extra time to pre-teach materials, re-teach the day's lesson, address missing foundational skills, and correct misunderstandings will help students struggling in math and ELA at the secondary level.

Similar to the recommendation for elementary reading, districts that have raised the achievement of students who struggle provide them with extra instructional time each day to master grade level content. This is often referred to as a "double dose" support model, as the students who struggle receives both their general education ELA or math course and an intervention course targeting their specific skill deficits. Student progress should be monitored during interventions, allowing students who demonstrate sufficient progress to be exited from the intervention.

<u>Schedules for Students who Struggle</u>



This extra help often takes the form of an additional course in place of an elective, other extra help course, world language, resource room support and then shifting a required core course to a future year for all students who meet specific criteria.

Current Practices: Secondary

Many districts and supervisory unions in Vermont do not have the typical district structure of elementary and secondary schools seen across the country. Within the SU/SDs participating in the study, two supported students K-8 with students leaving the SU/SD after 8th grade. Three SUs had a series of elementary schools, followed by a joined junior/senior high school. Four of the SU/SDs had a separate middle school and high school, and one SU had K-8 elementary schools and a high school.

For the purposes of this section, and to accommodate the many configurations at the secondary level, the "middle school" section contains a conversation of practices focused on grades 6-8. The high school section captures grades 9-12. Since service delivery models for special education were similar across the middle and high school grades, the data is presented jointly. This also accommodates the three SUs that have a Junior/Senior high school configuration.

This section will be structured as a review of middle school practices, high school practices, and the consolidated secondary data.

Like the elementary schools, a pattern of how and when struggling learners, both with and without IEPs, are supported for reading, writing, and math needs emerged across secondary schools in the participating SU/SDs.

Most secondary schools organized their middle school grades (6-8), students, and teachers into teams. The teams were often comprised of core content teachers, a special education teacher and often a social/emotional support practitioner (such as a guidance counselor or social worker). Often, some interventionists had time allocated to the middle schools, however they often floated between teams and grades. While some schools and teams referenced a formal EST and MTSS process similar to what was described at the elementary schools, teams indicated that often at the secondary level the intervention course placement is determined at the beginning of the year and less likely to rotate students during the year. Unlike the elementary schools, many middle schools discussed the use of an intervention period to support students struggling in math, reading, or writing. It was more common to hear of an intervention and enrichment block at the middle schools than the elementary schools. While intervention blocks varied from 23 minutes – 60 minutes across the middle schools, there was a focus on using this time to address missing foundational skills, pre-teach lessons and un-teach misconceptions.

Several middle schools had best practice extra time models in place. These schools offered targeted programs for students struggling in reading or math that occurred outside of their core content classes in place of an elective course. These programs lasted between 45-60 minutes each day, with a clear focus on remediation. Teams discussed the importance of regular progress monitoring to check student progress, along with clear entrance and exit criteria from the program. Often this course was open to students both with and without IEPs, however due to a limited number of seats in the course, some students were provided support through alternative settings.

In middle schools where extra-time intervention blocks were not in place, students who struggle were typically supported in the general education classroom either by a general education teacher or interventionist during the corresponding core content subject.

By contrast, students who struggle with mild-to-moderate needs often received support from a special education teacher as well as a paraprofessional. The support model for students with mild-to-moderate disabilities was fairly consistent across middle schools, even if an intervention block was present. Teams noted that in many cases, students required support across multiple subjects which surpassed the length of the intervention period, requiring students to either be supported during the core content class, or as a pull-out support.

Few high schools across the participating SU/SDs, had a cohesive extra time framework in place for struggling learners without IEPs. There were several outlier schools that provided extra time courses focused on math skills or reading skills, but few offered extra time courses with an emphasis on filling in missing foundational skills and targeting the students' learning deficits with the goal of exiting the course. Typically, students were placed into math and English courses the prior year based on state assessment scores and grades in core subjects. Many high schools discussed "tracked" programs specifically for math, where students would be placed into a remedial, standard, or honors track upon entering 9th grade. Few high schools discussed clear entrance and exit criteria for remedial courses, and noted that students rarely had the opportunity to move out of a track once set in 8th grade.

Two support models emerged in the participating SU/SDs regarding the support for struggling learners with IEPs. The first was a preference for co-teaching across a variety of courses: math, English, science and social studies were often mentioned as being co-taught classes. Co-taught classes would be taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher.

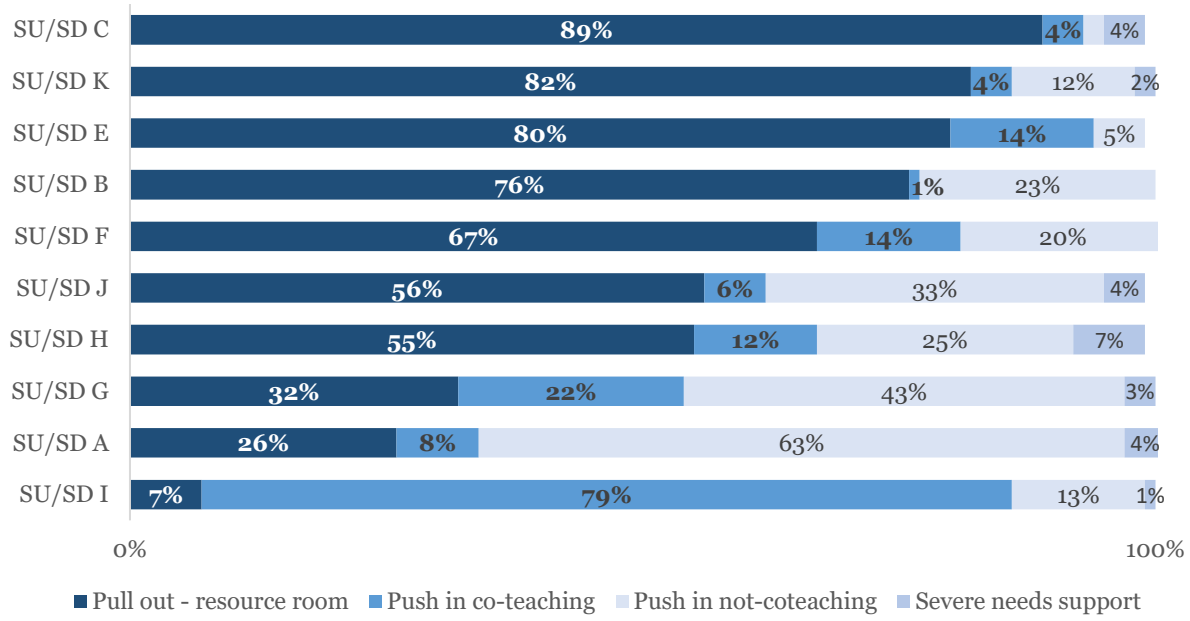
A co-teaching model provides greater "intensity" of support (i.e. multiple adults providing support at the same time), however, it does not provide extended time on task for the students who struggle. National research suggests that co-teaching seldom raises student achievement at scale. While individual co-teaching pairs may be very effective, this is more often the exception than the rule. In his 2008 review of educational research, Visible Learning, John Hattie notes that on average co-teaching actually produced less or equal learning than a class with a single teacher, while costing twice as much.

Other SU/SDs relied on a special education resource room (sometimes call a Learning Lab) to support students who struggle with mild-to-moderate disabilities. Typically, students with mild to moderate disabilities would either attend the resource room in place of a core subject or as an additional period. It was common to hear that the resource room often served as more of a "homework help" setting than an intentional period with a clear focus on remedial math, English, or reading. Often due to students across grades being scheduled into the same resource room period, teachers described needing to support students in multiple subjects during a single period. For example, a special education teacher may be expected to support students in Algebra, Biology, and English 10, all in the same period.

Across the secondary schools, more teams expressed a preference for shifting to a co-teaching model. However, under the current practices much of the support is provided out of class in a resource room setting.

Time Spent in Settings

Special Education Teachers (Secondary)[15]



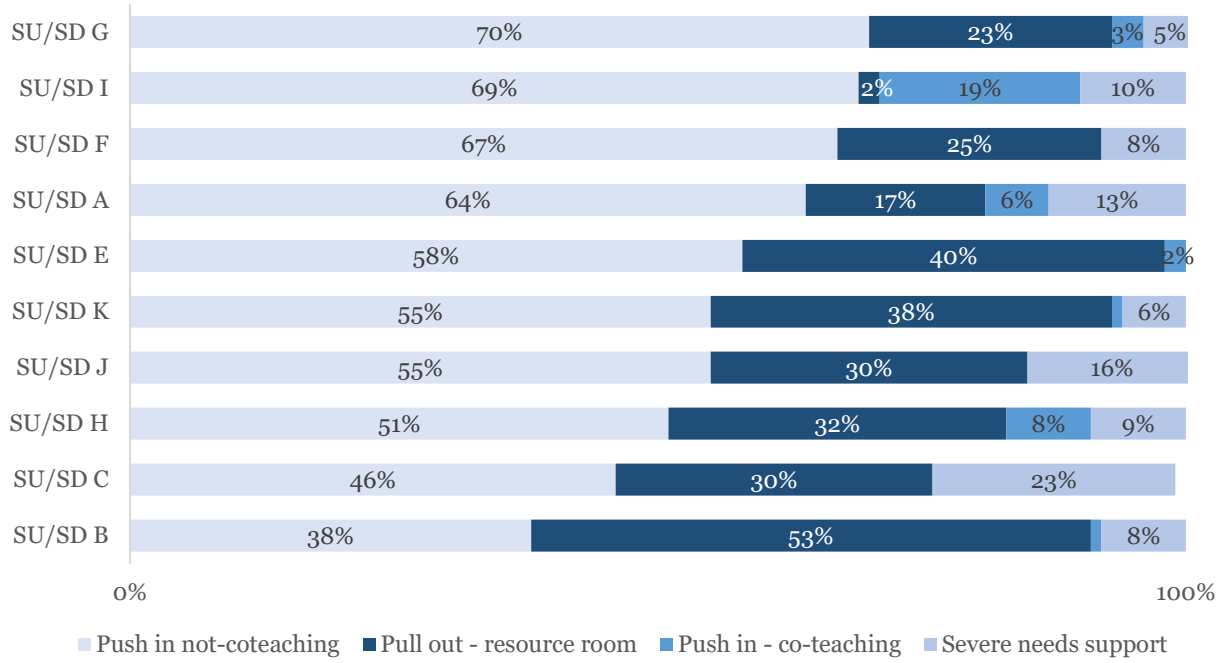
- Special education teachers spend the majority of their time in 7/10 SU/SDs primarily supporting students outside of the classroom.
- A preference for pushing-in to the classroom in a formal co-teaching and not-co-teaching pattern emerged in three of the SU/SDs.
- One SU was excluded from the analysis because they did not have any secondary schools.

Across the middle and high school grades, special education teams and general education teachers continue to rely on paraprofessional support both in the classroom, and also as additional team members in the resource rooms. Staff did not indicate that the responsibilities of paraprofessionals differed from the elementary schools to the secondary schools. Most school-based staff described the primary paraprofessional responsibly as in-class academic and behavior support for students both with and without IEPs.

[15] In four of the ten SU/SDs represented, special education teachers focused on supporting students with severe needs were excluded from the data. In the remaining six of the ten districts, the data may include time spent supporting students with severe needs.

Time Spent in Settings

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Secondary)[16]



- In many SU/SDs paraprofessionals support students in the general education classroom.
- Paraprofessionals also provide student support outside of the general education classroom in the typical secondary support model.

Application:

Many secondary schools across the participating SU/SDs could benefit from creating a cohesive approach to supporting struggling learners both with and without IEPs. It was common to hear that often there were limited course offerings for struggling learners that could effectively target and fill missing foundational skills. While it was common to hear that students with IEPs may receive extra time in a resource room, it was then uncommon to hear that this time was used intentionally with a focus on a single subject and best practice remediation strategies.

[16] In three of the ten SU/SDs represented, paraprofessionals supporting students with severe needs were removed from the analysis. The delineation was not possible in seven of the ten SU/SDs, as such there may be some data points included for practitioners supporting students with severe needs.

3. Ensure learners who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers.

Best Practice: Elementary

Just as the content expertise of the general education classroom teacher is critical to high-quality instruction in the regular classroom, it is essential that students who receive extra time and extra help receive support from a staff with strong pedagogical content knowledge of the subjects they are teaching and have extensive training and aptitude. For students who struggle to read, research indicates that the subject-specific training of the instructor has significant bearing on the student's likelihood of achieving grade-level mastery.

Effective teachers of reading can come from different backgrounds, including classroom teachers, certified reading teachers, or special educators. Unfortunately, certification is not a reliable indicator of who is or is not an effective teacher of reading. Training, coursework and past results are far better indicators. For example, some classroom teachers may have little formal training in teaching reading, but regularly achieve more than a year's growth each year with students who started the year behind grade level. Conversely, some special educators may have received their degrees and certification without taking more than one course in how to teach reading. Some special education teachers are strong advocates for the needs of students with disabilities, and have much expertise in pedagogical practices, but have limited background in the teaching of reading. Districts that have made the most significant gains among struggling readers have done so by providing students who struggle, both with and without IEPs, extra time with teachers skilled in the teaching of reading.

Reminder: Please note that each individual student is unique, and nothing in these findings should suggest otherwise. Student needs are personal and individual, and services and supports must be personalized as well. Some of the opportunities are appropriate for students with mild to moderate disabilities and students who struggle without disabilities, but not appropriate for students with severe disabilities or with autism.

Current Practices: Elementary

Each participating SU/SD employed interventionists at the elementary level. Anecdotally, interventionists had a strong background in reading or math, with the training and skills to effectively remediate students. For many students, being placed into a Tier 2 intervention meant access to a skilled reading interventionist which is aligned with best practices.

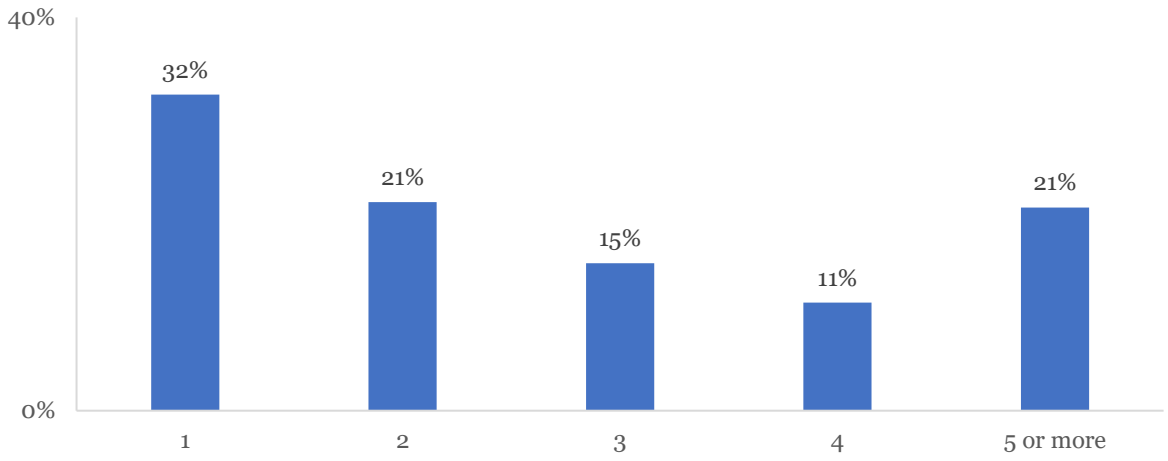
Across focus groups, many teams discussed the need for additional interventionists so they could support more students on a more consistent basis. Conversations indicated that often, interventionists have a difficult time supporting all struggling readers due to two competing factors. The first is that the daily and weekly schedule of the school limits their ability to see students consistently at a time that is not during reading. Interventionists discussed that the complex school schedules often lead to times when either no students can be supported at all, or students from across a variety of grades are available at the same time. Without thoughtful scheduling of interventionists to facilitate grouping, it reduces the number of students that can be seen daily for reading interventions. Second, small school sizes (under 125 students) can make grouping difficult due to the limited number of students with similar needs, forcing a

costly model onto the schools that emphasizes 1:1 services. Generally, the smaller schools have a part time interventionist, who, due to scheduling issues is not available each day for interventions.

As these issues compound, many schools choose to focus staff at "the younger grades" with the hopes of providing intervention at the first signs of struggling. This also means that if students begin to struggle in reading in the later elementary grades, this expertise is not available. Interventionists across the participating SU/SDs expressed a desire to alleviate scheduling issues so they could consistently group students and create strong reading groups based on level and need. Currently, the interventionists have a median group size of 2.0 students, with 32% of the time spent in 1:1. Best practice research suggest groups of 4-6 students can be highly effective. The lower group size in some elementary schools was sometimes due to interventionists being staffed on the Reading Recovery program, which is 1:1.

Student Group Size

Interventionists (Elementary)

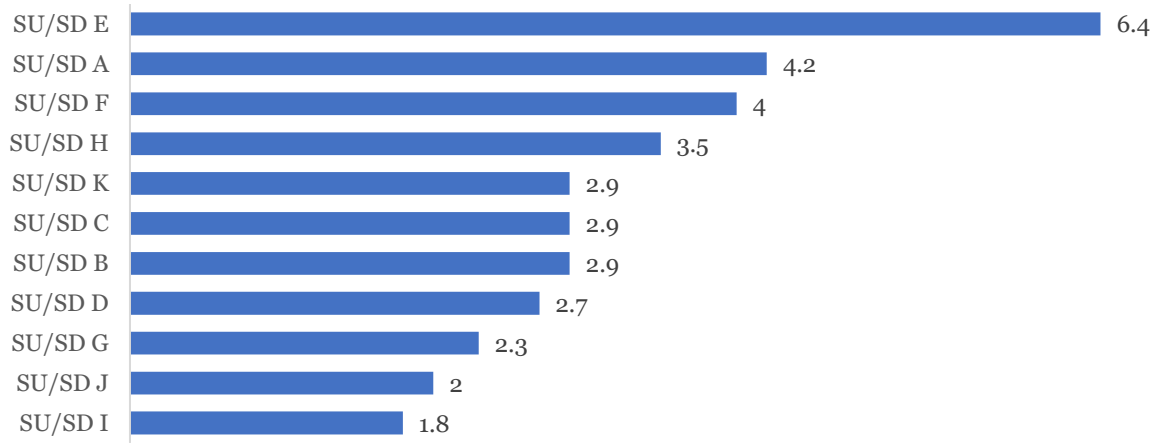


- Over 50% of interventionist time was spent working with student groups of two or one-on-one.

Some elementary schools are grouping effectively, and efficiently utilizing their intervention resources. A few of the smaller schools noted that the interventionists' time is planned at the beginning of the year with the master school schedule in mind. A schedule is created that staggers the interventionist time so they are consistently with students when in the school. Proactively scheduling the interventionist, is leading some schools to create larger groups at the elementary schools across all grades.

Average Student Group Size

Interventionists (Elementary)



- Some interventionists prioritize grouping, with three SU/SDs having an average group size of four or more students.
- Across the group the average student group size was 3.3, while the median group size was 2.0.

If each SU/SD grouped students at the rate of SU/SD E (6.4), approximately twice as many students could be supported by the interventionists.

If a student has mild-to-moderate needs and is struggling with reading, that student will be supported by a special education teacher and often a special education paraprofessional.

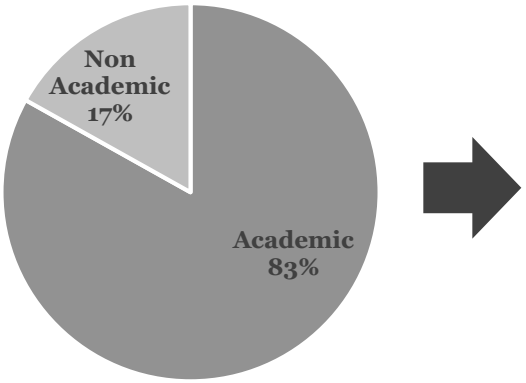
While some special education teachers across the SU/SDs had a strong background in the teaching of reading, consistent across most focus group conversations was a sentiment that special education teachers had to be "experts in everything." Often, special education teachers are expected to support students in math, reading, writing, behavioral issues, and social support – in many cases across multiple grades and possibly multiple schools. Many special education teachers described a willingness to develop a caseload that allowed them to focus on topics that matched their background, while also facilitating partnerships with general education teachers to ensure alignment of lessons.

Within the group of participating SU/SDs there were several examples of focusing a student caseload based on expertise, however the vast majority of teachers are spread across multiple subjects.

Across the group, elementary special education teachers spend 83% of their time providing academic support, the majority of which is focused in reading.

Instructional Topic by Time

Special Education Teachers (Elementary)[17]

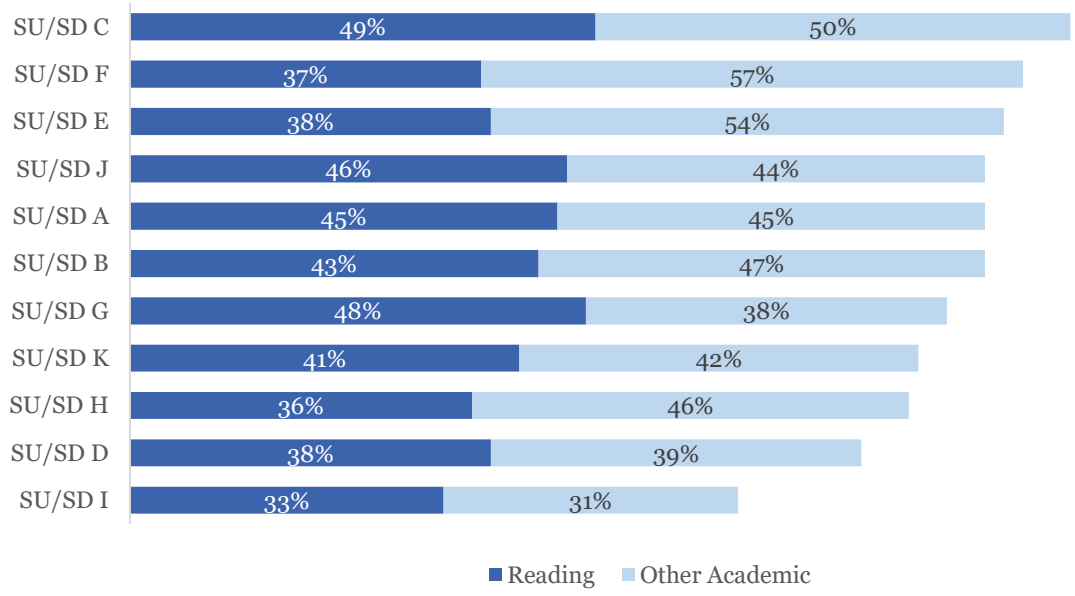


Academic topic	% time spent
Reading	39%
Math	30%
Writing	13%
Science	1%
Social studies	0%
Total academic instruction	**83%**

- On average, elementary special education teachers spend 83% of their time with students dedicated to academic support.
- Thirty-nine percent of this time was dedicated to reading.

Time Dedicated to Academics by SU/SD

Special Education Teachers (Elementary)[18]



[17] Due to the full inclusion model present in most SU/SDs, the data may include time special education teachers spent supporting students with more severe needs.
[18] The data may include time special education teachers spent supporting students with more severe needs.

- Special education teachers reported spending between 64% and 99% of their time with students focused on core academics.
- Of this time, all allocated at least 30% to the teaching of reading.

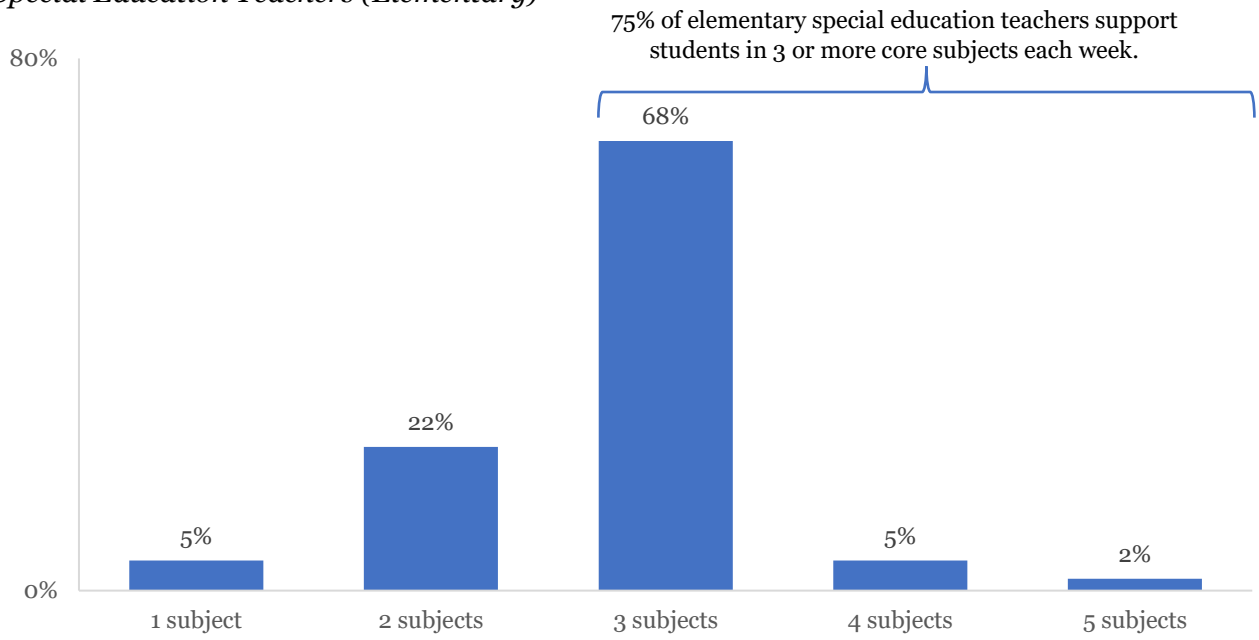
Special education teachers indicated that they often do not have the training, background, or skills to effectively support students struggling with reading.

Further schedule analysis indicated that 95% of special education teachers at the elementary school are teaching reading, and 86% of the special education teachers support both reading and math during a typical week. One teacher out of the 111 that participated reported a sole focus on the teaching of reading, with 7/111 (6%) denoting a specialization in teaching only reading and writing.

Fully, 75% of special education teachers are expected to support struggling learners in 3 or more subjects.

Number of Subjects Taught

Special Education Teachers (Elementary)[19]



- The majority of special education teachers teach 3 to 5 subjects per week (75%)
- Five out of the 111 (4%) special education teachers participating indicated focusing on a single subject.

Students with mild to moderate disabilities may also be supported by special education paraprofessionals. Many paraprofessionals discussed their role in the classroom as being fully

[19] The data may include time special education teachers spent supporting students with more severe needs.

responsible for academic, social, and behavioral support when a special education teacher was not available.

There were multiple strategies to providing paraprofessional support, which depend on how the IEP was written by the team.

The most common paraprofessional support model was for a paraprofessional to be assigned to a classroom that had multiple students with IEPs and mild-to-moderate disabilities. The paraprofessional would then be expected to support the students throughout the day as questions arise, or as the students act out behaviorally. While the paraprofessionals most likely had other duties like recess monitoring, lunch duty or bus duty, they would be present in the general education classroom for the remainder of the school day.

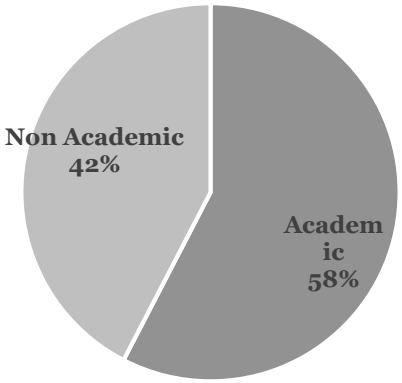
About half of the participating SU/SDs reported that there was an expectation of paraprofessionals' supervision and management from a special education teacher. In these situations, paraprofessionals are assigned to a special education teacher to support that special education teacher's caseload. The expectation from leadership is that teachers are meeting with paraprofessionals regularly to provide academic coaching and preparation support. Across the districts that use this model, however, the special education teachers reported less than 2% of their time as dedicated to paraprofessional management and supervision. Teams noted that quite often, paraprofessionals were expected to learn the lesson as it is taught by the general education teacher alongside the students they support.

Several SU/SDs micro-scheduled their special education paraprofessionals to be present in core content classes such as reading, or math. In micro-scheduled schools, paraprofessionals rotate both students and classrooms during the day to both facilitate student independence and support core academics.

Across the group, 58% of paraprofessional time was focused on academics. Fifteen to 25% of paraprofessional time was focused on reading, a weighted percentage across the group of 19% of student contact time

Instructional Topic by Time

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Elementary)[20]

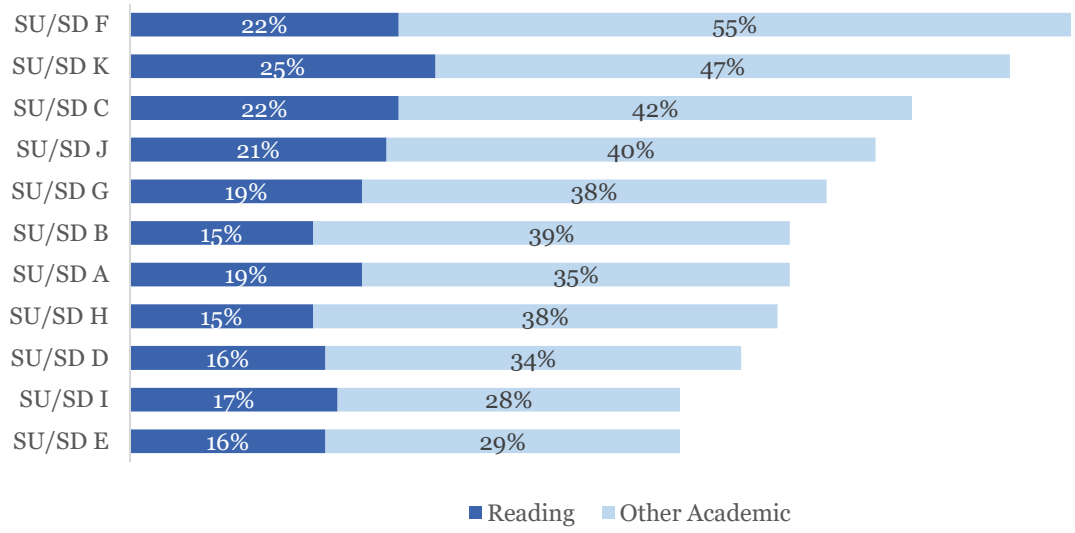


Academic topic	% time spent
Math	20%
Reading	19%
Writing	11%
Science	4%
Social studies	4%
Total academic instruction	**58%**

- On average, paraprofessionals support students academically 58% of the time they are with students.
- An average of 20% of this time was dedicated to math, and 19% teaching reading.

Time Dedicated to Academics by SU/SD

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Elementary)[21]



- Paraprofessionals spent between 15-25% of their time with students dedicated to reading support.

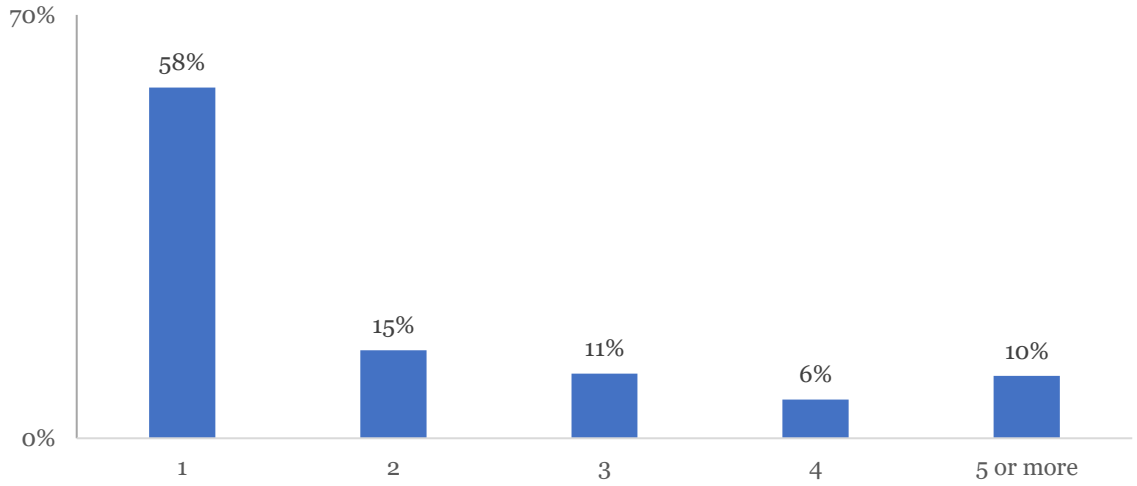
[20] Due to the full inclusion model a delineation between paraprofessionals supporting students with mild-to-moderate and severe needs was not possible. The data may contain time paraprofessionals staff spent supporting students with more severe needs.
[21] The data may include time special education paraprofessionals spent supporting students with more severe needs.

- On average, paraprofessionals allocate 19% of their student support time to reading support.

Further, while working with students, paraprofessionals reported spending the majority of their time working with students one-on-one or in groups of two.

Student Group Size

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Elementary)[22]



- Special education paraprofessionals support students 1:1 58% of the time they are with students.

Application:

It is a more effective intervention to provide extra time with teachers who are highly-skilled in the teaching of reading than in-class support from paraprofessionals, who generally do not have extensive training in the teaching of reading. Further, students who are receiving support from a paraprofessional in the classroom may experience less time and attention from content-strong teachers. It is not uncommon for a general education teacher to assume that students with additional adult support are "taken care of," and instead focus their attention on those who have no additional adult support.

Best Practice: Secondary

Just as the content expertise of the instructor is vital for the success of all students who struggle at the elementary level, this is true at the secondary level as well.

Research shows the content expertise of the instructor has significant bearing on the student's likelihood of mastering the grade-level material. Content-strong experts have the ability to identify missing foundational skills, correct misconceptions, and break down complex ideas in a way that is more accessible for struggling learners. As standards have risen and the complexity of the content increased, staff having a deep understanding and mastery of what they teach has become even more important.

[22] The data may include time special education paraprofessionals spent supporting students with more severe needs.

Given the greater complexity of the subject matter at the secondary level, it can be difficult for staff without subject matter expertise to explain key concepts, to reteach material using two or three different approaches or interpret underlying misconceptions from students based on their incorrect answers.

Current Practices: Secondary

As student needs and the subjects taught become more complex at the secondary level, it is increasingly important to ensure support is provided by individuals who are content experts and who have strong pedagogical content knowledge.

Several middle schools are providing time and access to interventionists for students who struggle, and do not have IEPs. These interventionists at the middle schools often reported structured time for students to focus on key remedial strategies such as pre-teaching lessons, un-teaching misconceptions, and working to address missing foundational skills. The middle schools with these programs ensure that the interventionists steering the program have the skills and background in the subject, and this model is aligned with best practices.

For middle school grades without intervention programs, teams noted that students who struggle without IEPs would most likely receive help from the general education classroom teacher, either during an advisory time, or during the general education class. While this model was less structured, teams noted that the support was always provided by the expert – the general education teacher.

For students with IEPs who are struggling academically, they will most likely receive support from a special education teacher. Teams noted that similar to the elementary teachers, they were responsible for supporting the students across a range of core subjects, in addition to supporting the student's social and emotional needs. However, many middle school special education teachers noted that they were part of the team, and had weekly meetings with classroom teachers to discuss curriculum and lessons to ensure alignment.

Unlike the elementary and middle schools, a cohesive approach to supporting struggling learners without IEPs did not emerge across the participating high schools. It was common for struggling learners to be placed into a remedial course, if available, which may be taught by a core content teacher. However many SU/SDs noted that often, the option available to students struggling at the high schools, would be optional extra time hours at the start or end of school, or perhaps centered around the lunch break. Teams noted that the general education teacher was expected to be available during this time, however students were rarely required to make use of this resource.

For students with IEPs who are struggling academically, they typically received support from a special education teacher in a resource room, and possibly by being placed into a co-taught class. At the high school, special education teachers discussed that in most cases, their caseload varies across many subjects and grade ranges. Within the resource room, they may be expected to support Algebra 1, Biology, and English 9 within the same hour. Special education teachers noted that often, the resource room time turns into homework help, rather than targeted instruction focused on remediation.

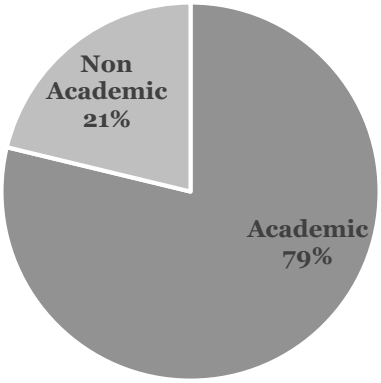
At the high school, more teachers reported that they were co-teaching subjects in which they had expertise. Many special education teachers noted that while they may be placed in a co-taught

class based on their background, they were often still responsible for teaching a myriad of different subjects throughout the week based on the needs and IEP goals of their caseload.

Across the secondary schools, special education teachers reported allocating 79% of their time with students dedicated to academics.

Instructional Topic by Time

Special Education Teachers (Secondary)[23] [24]



Academic topic	% time spent
Reading	27%
Math	27%
Writing	14%
Social studies	7%
Science	4%
Total academic instruction	**79%**

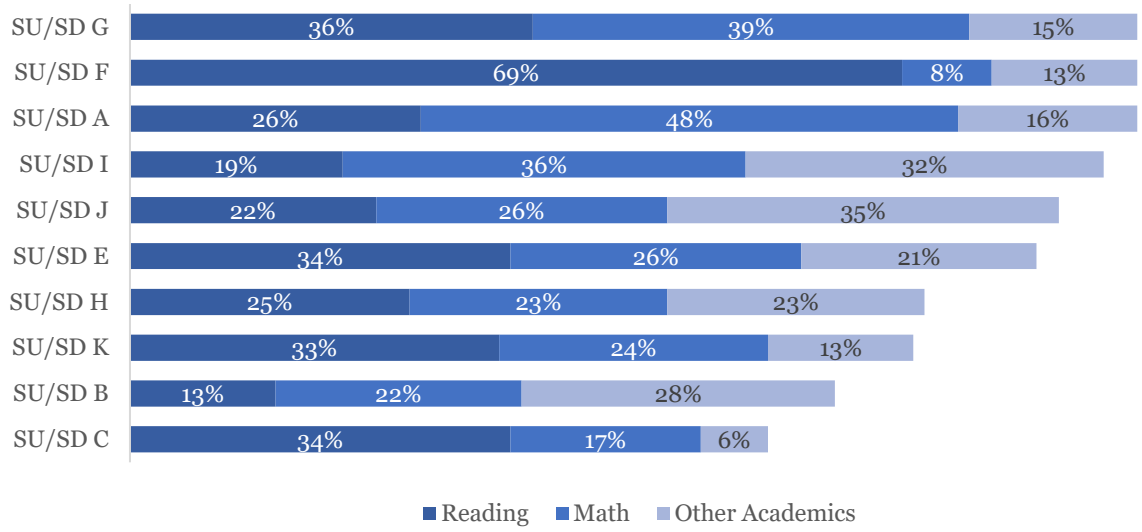
- Across the secondary schools, 79% of special education teacher time was dedicated to academics.
- There was an even distribution of time dedicated to math and reading.

Many participating SU/SDs showed a near equal focus on reading and math at the secondary level.

[23] One SU/SD was removed from this portion of the data because they did not have separate secondary facilities.
[24] Due to support models, it was possible to separate out severe needs teachers from teachers supporting students with mild-to-moderate needs for four of the ten districts.

Time Dedicated to Academics by SU/SD

Special Education Teachers (Secondary)[25]



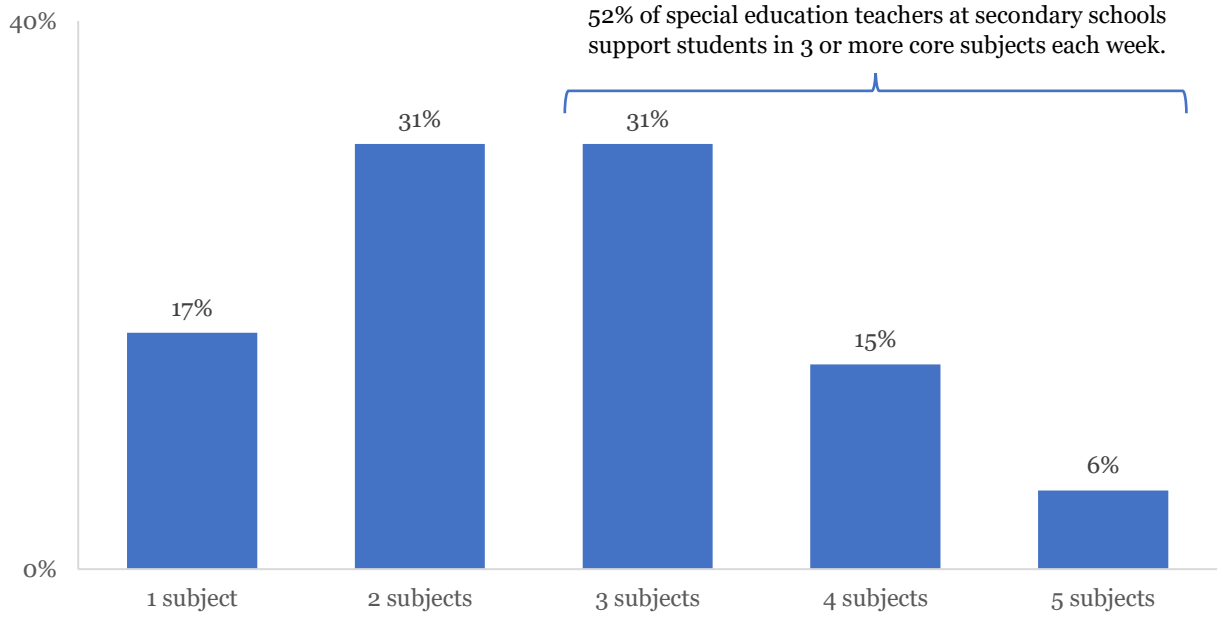
- Secondary special education teachers reported a range of 13% - 69% of student support time dedicated to reading.
- The special education teachers reported between 8%-48% of their student support time dedicated to math.

At the secondary level, the percentage of teachers supporting students in one subject increased to 17%. Of the group of special education teachers, 52% reported supporting students in 3 or more subjects over the course of the week. Further breaking this down, 80% of teachers at the secondary level provide some reading support, with 57% of the entire group providing math and reading support during a typical week.

[25] Due to support models, it was possible to separate out special education teachers supporting students with more severe needs from teachers supporting students with mild-to-moderate needs for four of the ten districts.

Number of Subjects Taught

Special Education Teachers (Secondary)[26]



- Seventeen percent of teachers reported they only provide support in one core subject at the secondary schools.
- The majority of teachers reported supporting special education teachers in 3 or more subjects each week.

While a special education teacher may be a content-strong expert in a particular subject depending on their background and experience, it is unlikely that any teacher would be a content-strong expert in multiple academic subjects, particularly at the secondary level, when content areas become more advanced and complex.

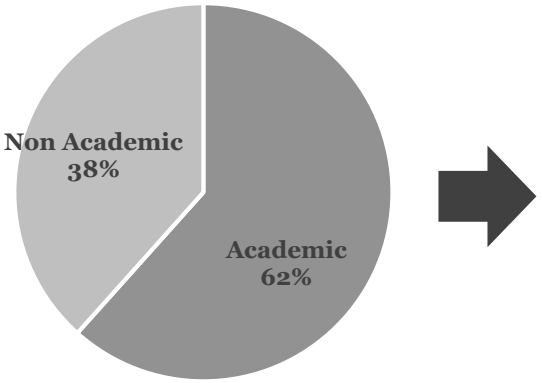
At the secondary schools, paraprofessionals were also present in the general education classroom and the special education classroom. Unlike special education teachers, whom may be given preference based on their skills regarding subject placements, paraprofessionals reported being assigned to classrooms in which they did not have a background. Many paraprofessionals discussed at the secondary level the topics becoming more complex, and their ability to answer student questions and support their needs was challenging due to the content.

Across the secondary schools, paraprofessionals allocate 62% of their time to providing academic support, with 17% focused on math, and 13% reading support. Aligned with focus group conversations, paraprofessionals also indicated nearly equal time allocated to writing, science and social studies.

[26] Due to support models, it was possible to separate out special education teachers supporting students with more severe needs from teachers supporting students with mild-to-moderate needs for four of the ten districts.

Instructional Topic by time

Special Education Paraprofessionals (Secondary)[27]



Academic topic	% time spent
Math	17%
Reading	13%
Science	12%
Writing	10%
Social studies	9%
Total academic instruction	**62%**

- Paraprofessionals at the secondary level allocated 62% of student support time to academics.
- The paraprofessionals support students across all subjects, math, reading, science, writing and social studies.

Application:

Many SU/SDs across the group had elements of these best practices in place, but a clear SU/SD-wide approach for supporting struggling learners with and without IEPs at the secondary level often did not materialize. While some middle and high schools were utilizing a best practice intervention model, with daily extra time taught by a content expert, seats were often limited and student need exceeded the capacity of the class. Creating extra time for students who struggle with content strong teachers is a complex task, requiring much planning and discussion with a wide range of stakeholders. In formulating a SU/SD-wide plan to provide extra time, SU/SDs should consider defining standards and guidelines to ensure all students identified as struggling, including students with and without IEPs, consistently receive additional time in interventions.

[27] In three of the ten SU/SDs represented paraprofessionals supporting students with severe needs were removed from the analysis. The delineation was not possible in seven of the ten SU/SDs, as such there may be some data points included for practitioners supporting students with severe needs.

4. Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting student behaviors based on best practice and expert support.

Nearly all schools across the country are experiencing an increased need for social, emotional and behavioral supports. The stresses on the lives of children and their families seem to be increasing and the prevalence of more severe behavioral challenges is growing as well.

The impact on teachers, schools and students is seen every day. It is hard for students to learn when their social and emotional needs aren't being met, it's difficult for students with behavioral challenges to learn if they are removed from the general education classroom and behavioral outbursts can distract other students and redirect the teachers' time as well.

Across the group study, the concerns of staff members regarding the rise of drug use in their communities were consistently raised. More specifically, leadership and staff discussed the growing concern in the prevalence of students coming to school having experienced trauma in their lives. While there is no easy fix, meeting the social emotional and behavioral needs of these students will require a group effort and a proactive approach.

Best Practice

There are many roles that are essential in supporting the social-emotional and behavioral needs of students, but creating a system that ensures students are adequately supported requires coordinating these roles in a cohesive way.

Research has shown that intervention models, which incorporate both academic and social, emotional and behavioral supports, produce larger gains in student outcomes.

A high-quality system for behavioral support starts with effective whole school and class-wide expectations, routines, positive encouragement and thoughtful student-centered discipline practices. The general education teacher plays a central role in executing behavioral supports in the core classroom by establishing behavioral norms, teaching correct behaviors through practice, monitoring student progress, and correcting and reinforcing behavioral expectations. It is important to first present students with clear and specific examples of appropriate behavior in order to build a shared understanding of behavioral expectations. Students should also be provided with opportunities to practice the appropriate behavior with positive reinforcement, or redirections if needed.

In addition to these universal practices, some students with behavioral challenges will need more. Detailed data can help identify the triggers of problematic behavior and skilled experts can advise both students and teachers how to avoid the triggers, see the telltale warning signs and develop coping mechanisms. These are critical steps that focus on preventing behavioral challenges before they happen and creating skills that build student independence that will be especially helpful after graduation.

Supporting children with behavioral needs is most effective through a unified team effort. Paraprofessionals working under the direction of skilled behavior specialists, teachers being coached and counseled by experts in behavior management, and integrated social and emotional

counseling can collectively make a world of difference for children, teachers and the school as a whole.

There should also be a tight connection between behavioral supports and social-emotional supports. Given the significant social and emotional needs of students, social and emotional staff (psychologists, social workers, counselors, guidance staff, outside partners and others) have many demands on their time. Many districts are understaffed in this area. Some districts can expand the reach of these valued staff by closely managing and streamlining the time they spend in meetings and doing paperwork.

Creating a team approach should assign clear roles and responsibilities, based not just on role or title but on individual strengths, training and aptitude. For example, some school psychologists have deep expertise in behavior management as do some social workers and others, but not all do. Their training more than their title should matter most. By clearly defining responsibilities for IEP testing and evaluation, student counseling, teacher coaching, group work and supporting individuals with behavior challenges, the district can help these staff use their limited time for maximum impact.

Current Practices

It was common to hear in focus groups that the current approach to managing student behaviors was built upon both a school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework and integrating Responsive Classrooms techniques into the students' days. However, conversations around student behaviors quickly pivoted across all SU/SDs to the increasing needs of the student population, and the stresses these escalating needs were placing on staff and classrooms. Teachers discussed concerns that the behavioral issues, while limited to some students, were impacting the learning of other students in the classroom.

Staff across all SU/SDs stressed the importance of addressing student behaviors as a critical focus to improving academics.

Most SU/SDs discussed that in recent years there has been a rise in the number of students experiencing violence, trauma, poverty, and familial instability in their home life. Staff expressed concern that students' social-emotional needs can prove a barrier to learning, and emphasized this as an important priority area for improving student supports.

A shared sentiment across nearly all schools was a frustration at a lack of access to resources to support general education staff regarding behavior management. Absent across many schools was a clear response to escalating student behaviors and social/emotional needs. Some schools were utilizing elements of the MTSS framework, discussing social/emotional and behavioral concerns at Education Support Team meetings. However, it was more common to hear that in order to get access to behavior resources and expertise, students needed to be placed on an IEP. Once on an IEP, it was common for the paraprofessional to assume primary behavioral support of the student, with little training or background.

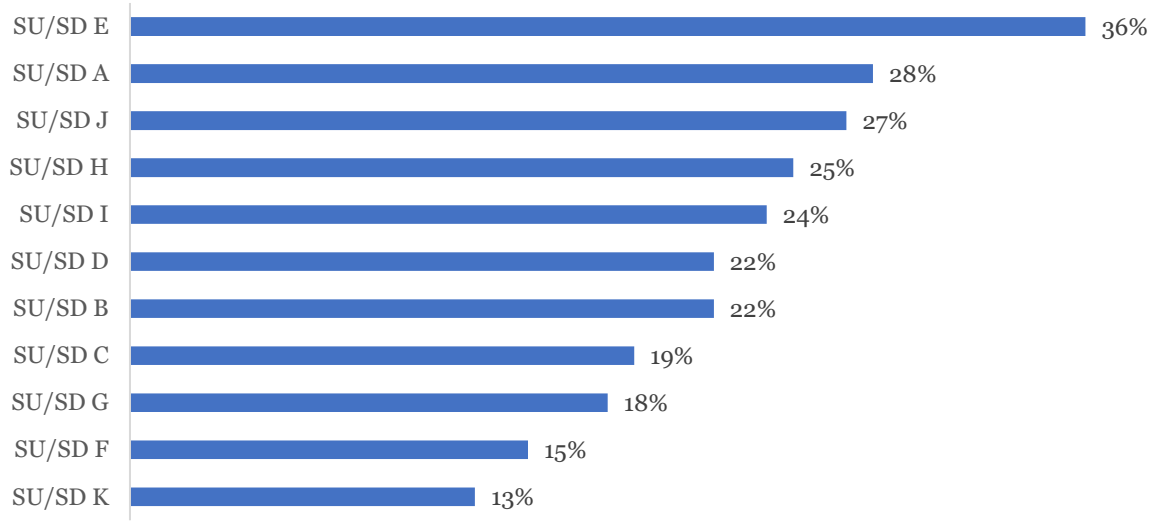
In a best practice approach, general education teachers would be well prepared to handle minor behavior and social/emotional supports in the classroom. Similar to academic tiered systems of support, if Tier 1 interventions are not proving useful the team could then layer on expertise from behavioral or social support specialists with the goal of ensuring students are successful and ready to learn in the general education classroom.

Many general education teachers expressed frustration at the lack of training and support provided to them to help manage student's behavioral and social/emotional issues. They expressed that general education staff often felt ill-equipped to support the diverse social/emotional and behavior needs present within their classrooms. Across the group, several elementary schools stood out as having a cohesive response to behavior across multiple levels of support. It was much more common to hear staff explain that often behavioral support was provided by the paraprofessional, often for students both with and without IEPs.

Currently, paraprofessionals are supporting students' behavioral issues 22% of the time they are with students.

Time Dedicated to Behavior Support

Special Education Paraprofessionals



- Special education paraprofessionals reported spending between 13-36% of the contracted work week supporting student behaviors.
- As a group, paraprofessionals allocate 22% of their time to behavior support.

Teams noted that without training and oversight, paraprofessionals and general education staff may unknowingly contribute to ongoing issues, unaware of the student's triggers and unclear of intervention techniques.

Many SU/SDs had experts in social/emotional and behavior support in their schools, however it was typical to hear that staff were unclear how they fit in to the response to behavior support – and how to gain access to their services. Across the districts that had licensed Behaviorists (BCBA), the team members typically only created behavior plans once students were placed on an IEP.[28] Sometimes, the BCBA was also responsible for ensure the behavior plan was carried out. In other cases, there was a disconnect and it was unclear who the responsible team member would be on a day-to-day basis.

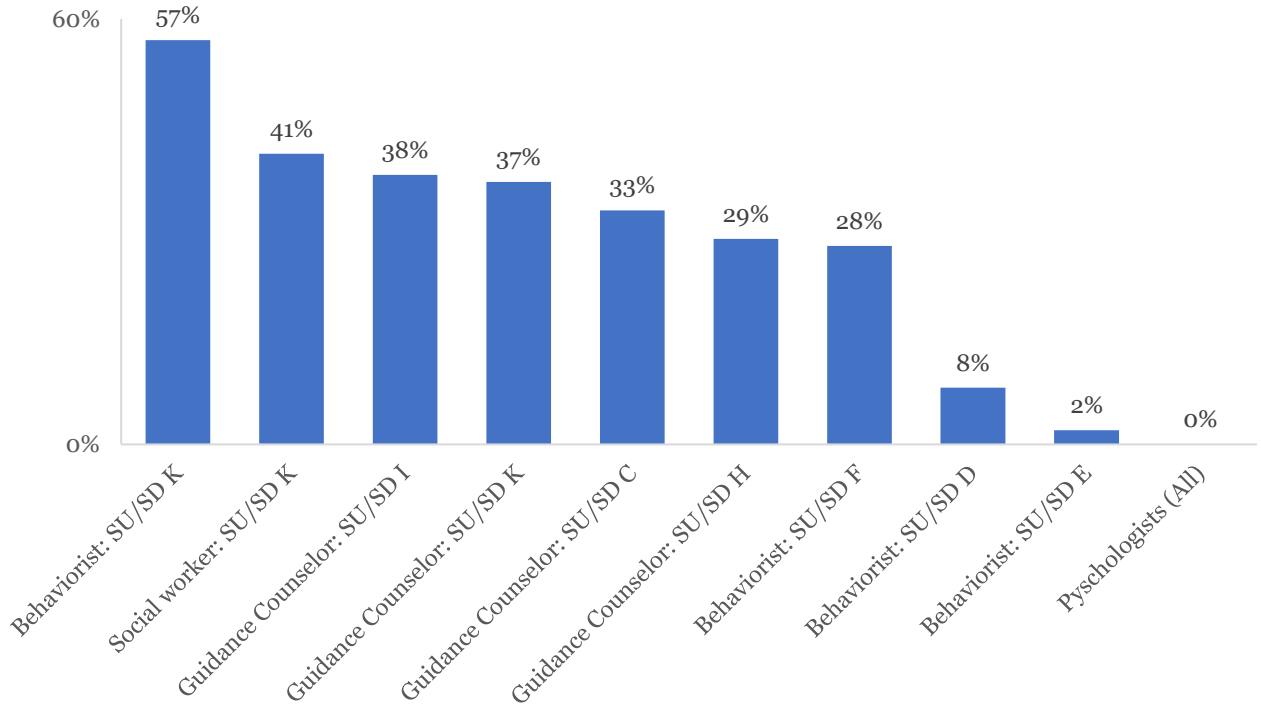
[28] Many participating SU/SDs also employed Behavior Interventionists whom were paraprofessionals focused on behavior, however were not licensed or trained behaviorists.

It was common to hear that guidance counselors, social workers, and psychologists did not have an active role in the behavior response team. Further, many teams were unclear of the parameters for when therapy or counseling would be provided by these team members. Many SU/SDs contract these practitioners from local mental health agencies and as such, only partial data was collected. However, of the data collected many of these social/emotional supports spend relatively low amounts of time per week dedicated to direct student support.

Schedule collection data indicated that the roles who may typically provide social-emotional/ behavioral supports to students across the SU/SDs are currently spending fairly low amounts of time working directly with students, due to the other demands placed on them.

Percent of Time Spent with Students

Behavioral / Social-Emotional Support Roles (All Levels)[29]



- Most social/emotional and behavior support staff reported less than 50% of their work week as directly supporting students.

Several SU/SDs did have a more cohesive response. Typically, these were the SU/SDs that had a SU-wide vision for how to approach the continuum of supports for social/emotional and behavior supports. These also tended to be larger districts, with someone overseeing SU/SD-wide guidelines and deployment of expertise. Further, these systems developed expertise among special education teaching staff based on background to focus on and oversee the supports of specific student needs.

[29] In one SU/SD the psychologist reported 3% direct service. When averaged with the other psychologists' time, the rounded average was less than 0.5% and rounded to 0%.

Application:

An overarching trend was that often, if schools were in charge of the social/emotional and behavioral support, teachers and staff were unsure how to "tap into" expertise they knew was available at other locations. Systems with a series of guidelines often had staff able to articulate the response plan. Many of the participating SU/SDs could benefit from creating a cohesive response system which utilizes and builds upon the existing expertise within its staff. By creating clear roles and responsibilities for special education teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, and general education teachers it could reduce the confusion and frustration around access to expertise and response to the growing social needs.

5. Provide students with more intensive support needs specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts.

Best Practice

Best practice research indicates that inclusion in the general education classroom can also be beneficial for students with more intensive support needs.[30] For this to be successful, it requires developing collaborative teamwork between general education teachers, special education teachers, related services providers, and paraprofessional staff to ensure the student is meaningfully included and instructed in the general education classroom lessons and activities with age-peers while also receiving necessary supports. For students with more intensive needs, it can be beneficial to define what skills will most benefit the student, including academic, communication, social, vocational, and functional life skills. Successful inclusive models for educating students with more intensive needs share the common trait that all staff work together to address the needs of the student through meaningful and supported instruction throughout the school day within shared activities with classmates.

Current Practices

All schools across the participating SU/SDs are dedicated to supporting students with more intensive needs. Focus groups with staff showed a tremendous dedication to the students they support, and a willingness to improve and ensure that the students are receiving appropriately supported instruction in the least restrictive environment. It was common to hear of paraprofessional staff using their personal time before and after school to research the disabilities of the students they support and seek out training opportunities to improve their ability to support the students. While staff were extremely dedicated to their students, many of the current practices as not consistent with quality inclusive practices.

At the elementary schools the support model for students with intensive needs differed, with the common variable often being school size and distance between elementary schools. Schools that would be considered medium to large by Vermont standards (250 – 500 students) tended to have specific programs in place for students with more intensive needs. These schools typically had programs for specific disabilities, such as autism, staffed with experts in that disability type supporting the students on a daily basis. Commonly, the students would still be included in the general education classroom for various time periods during the day, which is facilitated by a paraprofessional. In these programs, teams often discussed that students would receive lessons and build life skills by teachers with the skills and background to do so. These programs were often possible because there were a number of students eligible for the program to sustain it over multiple years. Additionally, the programs were present in schools that had lower enrollments if they were close to other elementary schools. The proximity to schools facilitated low-cost transportation, and special education leadership was able to create a hub for students with more intensive needs.

[30] The American Association on Intellectual Disabilities encourages practitioners to consider the intensity of support needs when discussing and determining support models. The term "intensive needs" is typically referred to as "more severe needs." For the purposes of this discussion, the term "intensive needs" will be used.

Many smaller elementary schools relied heavily on the support of one-on-one paraprofessionals to facilitate inclusion practices in the general education classroom. While inclusion in the classroom can be beneficial for students with intensive needs, anecdotally, their access to general education activities often was limited – leading to students being in the classroom, but not necessarily included in classroom activities or learning. The best practices literature is clear, that simply being present in a regular classroom and/or receiving the bulk of instruction from a paraprofessional are not consistent with quality inclusive practices. In reference to inclusive models for intensive needs students, staff discussed that often the paraprofessional was primarily responsible for the academic, social, and emotional support of the students while in the classroom. Paraprofessionals were expected to develop lessons and modify materials, often with limited access to the special education teacher for support. While many paraprofessionals were highly dedicated to their students and reported paying for their own training, development and learning, districts did not often provide paraprofessionals with the level of support necessary to make this a successful model.

Many secondary schools described programming for students with more intensive needs that indicated part of the day as targeted instruction in a special education classroom, while part of the day as included in the general education classroom. The extent to which the paraprofessional was relied upon in this model varied greatly between secondary schools across the participating SU/SDs. Some secondary schools had programs which imported targeted instruction in a special education classroom for part of the day, along with inclusion in the general education classroom for the remainder.

Regardless of the size of the school or the grade, many schools shared a common characteristic when it came to the support of students with more intensive needs. It was very common to hear across all grade ranges that general education teachers did not feel well equipped to support a student with more intensive needs in the classroom. Many teachers discussed a willingness to receive training, coaching, and support to better meet the needs of the students with more intensive support needs, yet no such coaching or collaboration time was reportedly dedicated to this model. Often, general education teachers at all levels assumed that the one-to-one paraprofessional that often accompanied the student was better equipped to support the student than the general education teacher. Paraprofessionals also discussed that often due to time limitations, they often rarely receive direction and oversight from special education staff regarding inclusion strategies for the students they support on a daily basis. It was common to hear that paraprofessionals are often asked to modify lessons and materials, with little to no training on how to meet the needs of the students. Across all levels, many teams emphasized the over-reliance on paraprofessionals to support the student over the course of the day, and little coordination between special education services and general education services to ensure that the student's time in the general education classroom was meaningful.

An exemplar district had a special education teacher that partnered with elementary general education staff to coach them through inclusion practices and ensure that the teachers were well prepared with the needs of the students that would be attending their general education class. General education teachers spoke highly of this model, discussing that the coaching support, collaboration on inclusion practices, and lesson modification allowed them to ensure they reached all students in their classroom. The teachers felt better equipped to include the students in daily classroom activities, and noted less of a reliance on paraprofessionals regarding academic instruction and materials modification.

Across all levels, SU/SDs have an opportunity to examine the use of paraprofessionals in its inclusion model for intensive needs students, ensuring they are truly facilitating student learning and independence.

6. Implications

a. Fiscal implications

Aligning SU/SDs to a best practice support model would not cost more, in fact, it would either be cost neutral or cost less than current practices. Many of the opportunities described involve utilizing current expertise found in the SU/SDs and realigning current systems, schedules, caseloads, and building assignments to align with staff expertise.

The following financial analysis was provided to each participating SU/SD utilizing their current staffing levels. The first analysis assesses if the participating SU/SDs were analyzed as a single district and how many incremental FTE would need to be added to current resources to meet the needs of students utilizing reading interventionists (highly skilled reading teachers). This analysis assumes that reading interventionists would support all students not scoring proficient on the state assessment. This section is meant to be directional.

As a combined group, the participating SU/SD have approximately 62.5 interventionists, 254 FTE special education teachers and 628 FTE special education paraprofessionals.[31]

With roughly 37% of students currently struggling in reading (below state proficiency) in the group of participating SU/SDs, an effective reading support model is needed that can provide intervention to approximately 3473 students.[32] If the group of participating SU/SDs chose to ensure that every student who struggles received intervention from a reading specialist, a total of 87 FTE would be required, based on the caseload of 40 students per teacher. With 62.5 reading specialists across the participating SU/SDs this would mean adding an additional 24.3 FTE to meet the existing student need.

While this is a substantial investment, it is only a small portion of the resources currently spent providing supports to students who struggle. In total, the group currently spends $19.5 million on special education teachers and $18.5 million on paraprofessionals. An approximate cost of the incremental add of 24.3 FTE reading interventionists would be $1.86 million.

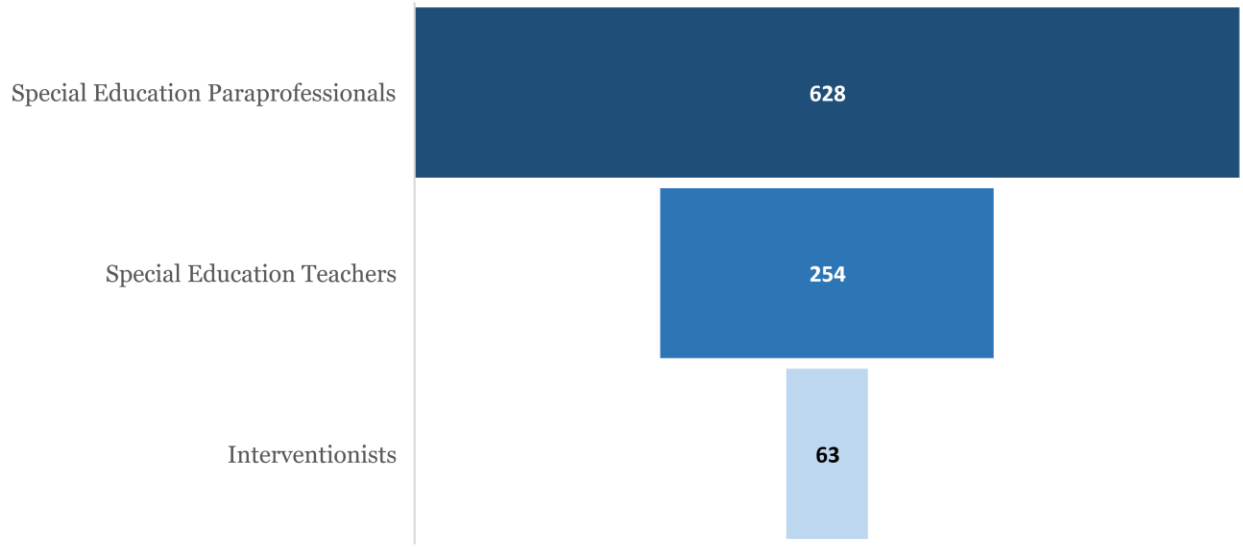
Across the participating SU/SDs, the group has invested in paraprofessional support rather than highly skilled staff.

[31] Regarding role classification: across the participating SU/SDs interventionists include certified teachers that are supporting students in reading or math interventions. Focus groups across SU/SDs indicated that these practitioners were highly skilled in the teaching of reading, and also include teachers funded by Title 1 that focus on Tier 2 reading interventions. Several SU/SDs employed "behavior interventionists" and "academic interventionists" that were un-certified and functioned as a paraprofessional. These staff members have been included in the paraprofessional staffing figures.

[32] While some schools support students K-6 or K-8, student enrollment for K-5 was captured across all SU/SDs to create a consistent model.

Ratio of Special Education Paraprofessional, Special Education Teacher and Interventionist FTE

Special Education Teachers, Special Education Paraprofessionals, Interventionists (All Levels)



- Across the participating SU/SDs, 66% of support staff employed are special education paraprofessionals, 27% of staff are special education teachers, and 7% are interventionists.

By shifting just a small percentage of resources over time, as staff retire or leave and positions free up, the participating SU/SDs can move toward a future where students who struggle are assured support from teachers with subject-specific training. No additional funds are required to provide every struggling reader extra time with a highly skilled and effective reading teacher. Based on the current investment of $18.5 million in paraprofessional salaries, it is the equivalent investment of 241 teachers when using a weighted average teacher salary of $76,693, including benefits.

The cost of reading intervention programs would decrease if there was an additional focus on strengthening core classroom reading instruction to better meet the needs of all students.

At the secondary level a similar situation exists. In best-practice districts, a general education "extra help" math, English or reading teacher can support 75 or more students who struggle and has in-depth content knowledge and training in the rigorous curriculum. A relatively small investment in content strong teachers can support a great many students. The SU/SDs can provide the double-dose supports from content strong teachers without increased spending, but by shifting resources over time.

b. Operational implications

Implementing these opportunities is a difficult undertaking, one that requires a sustained effort over multiple years. It will require adaptive changes, as well as technical changes. Given the small school sizes, and the limited management and leadership capacity at each level which are

often the result of small systems - a sustained effort will require external support, tools, and expertise to move toward a best practice model. These recommendations assume the effort will be done on a multi-Supervisory Union and state-wide scale.

To move forward with the best practices, it is essential to treat scheduling as strategically important. To implement the best practice support model for students both with and without IEPs, it would require coordination between school principals, special education leadership, and central office curriculum and instruction teams. In many cases, school master schedules are decided by the school principal, many of whom develop a specials/unified arts schedule, with limited input on length of literacy block, and intervention time. To shift to a best practice model, it is important to also create a master schedule with struggling learners in mind. Many principals described a willingness to create a strong intervention model, however only a handful expressed the importance of scheduling as a strategic priority. The lack of strategic scheduling is often the root cause of special education teachers and general education teachers feeling as though there is not enough support – and that more staff is required. When a thoughtful master schedule is not created it reduces the likelihood of strategic grouping, increasing the amount of 1:1 which often takes place, and reduces the number of students that can be supported.

Further, this requires district and SU-leadership to work with principals and staff to develop clear guidelines for when and how students are supported. The current lack of guidelines regarding when to push-in or pull-out of class across interventionists, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals is creating a large amount of pull-out support, often during core classes. In many cases, school master schedules are developed outside of coordination with special education staff and leadership. It was common to hear that the master schedule may be created, only to learn that an intervention block was scheduled on a day when a special education teacher was not assigned to a school. Then often led to a student being pulled out from a core content subject. It was equally common to hear that special education teams focused on core content subjects as the correct time to pull students from class. Creating clear guidelines and developing a master schedule to facilitate these guidelines, helps reduce the amount of pull-out from core classes and creates a better learning experience for students.

A similar approach should be taken at the secondary level. It was common to hear among focus groups that there was a misalignment between scheduling practices and appropriate course selection for struggling learners. Staff often had a difficult time describing how a student's day would look if they struggled, indicative of less formalized processes to support struggling learners. Creating a cohesive framework which emphasized extra time and a relentless focus on remediation, would require a break from current processes in place, with a new focus on alignment between course offerings, scheduling decisions, and data collection to ensure students do not get "tracked" on a lower level course once they enter the secondary grades. Tapping into existing expertise from content strong teachers at the secondary level to ensure that the extra time course is an intentional use of time, requires collaboration from general education and special education teams.

Across all levels, it will be important for there to be extensive coordination between special education leadership and school principals to reduce silo-ing during key decision-making phases and align models which build on expertise.

c. Realities of small school size and implementing a best practice model

The best practice model is anchored in a reality that larger schools, defined for this conversation as two classrooms per grade, or roughly more than 150 students, would have an easier time implementing these models. Smaller schools participating in this group study are often working in isolation and don't have the school based expertise or critical mass of staff to focus on "realignment" with current resources. For example, the school may not have a teacher with a strong background in behavior management, or may not have a teacher highly skilled in the teaching of reading. Further, many smaller schools cannot group students with similar needs due to the lower student enrollment, leading to more individualized support, and a more costly model. The model discussed in financial implications was based on a caseload of 40 students, however in the smaller schools there may not be 40 students that require support.

It was common to hear across the SU/SDs a shared sentiment of uniqueness, that the specific SU/SD did not share any of the same issues or challenges as neighboring communities. After the focus group on-sites and schedule sharing analysis, it became clear that the opposite was true. Across the group, many of the SU/SDs did share striking similarities in the ways that struggling learners are supported, and the challenges the schools face.

Many schools struggle with a perception that their school was either "too big" or "too small" to effectively support students. Further, despite their comparatively small size, elementary schools described highly complex scheduling and staffing decisions – creating a perception of not enough staff and a hectic day. A key takeaway is that if schools would like to implement best practice models, many need to break away from current perceptions of their uniqueness, and reach out to schools within their SU or across town lines to find solutions together.

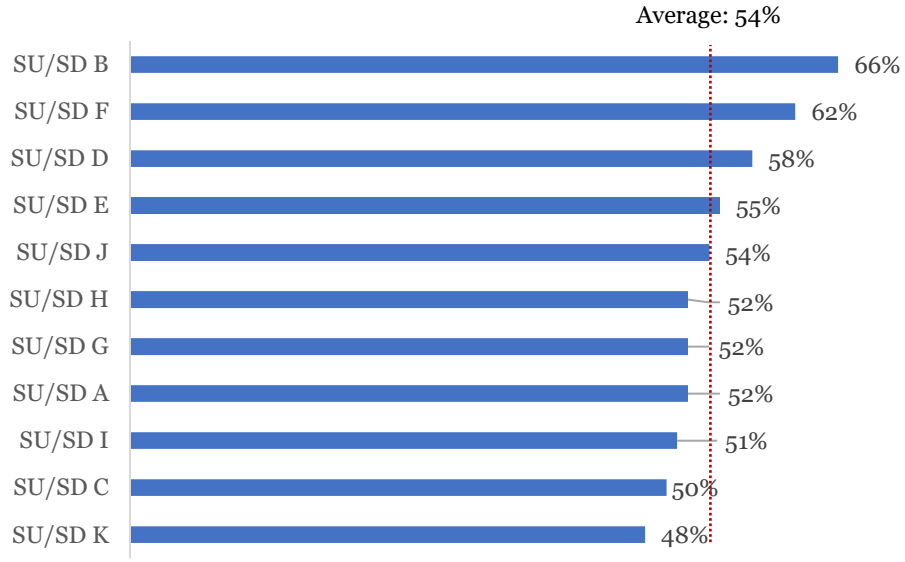
An example of this is an idea for many SU/SDs to create a concept of sister schools. Sister schools should be roughly the same size, with a similar level of need within a 30-45 minute drive of each other. The two schools would work together to create complementary master school schedules to facilitate both the sharing of staff, and a best practice support model for their students. It was common to hear that School A may have a 0.5 FTE interventionist, whom works Monday, Tuesday, and half of Friday. This staff members would only be able to provide interventions to students 2-3 days a week. The interventionist would then go to School B Wednesday, Thursday, and half of Friday. If the two schools coordinated scheduling, they could create complementary schedules to allow for interventions 5 days per week. If school A scheduled the interventionist for staggered interventions in the morning, School B could create a similar schedule in the afternoons. The interventionist would need to move schools each day, but it would increase the amount of intervention time, and increase consistency for the students. A similar approach could be done for special education teachers, depending on their expertise. In many cases, a single special education teacher will be assigned to a school, expected to support K-5 across all subjects. By creating shared schedules between two schools, the smaller schools would have access to multiple special education teachers whom could divide their caseload based on skills and background. While this is a break from current practices, for smaller schools to enact thoughtful support models, it will require coordination with schools outside of their district, and possibly outside of their supervisory union.

d. Efforts to reduce meeting and paperwork would allow districts to expand services

In all but one SU/SD, special education teachers described a current model where paperwork, testing, and meetings took up half of their week. Schedule sharing analysis aligned with this, as currently special education teachers across the group spend approximately 55% of the contracted work week with students.

Time Spent with Students

Special Education Teachers (All Levels)



- Based on a weighted average, special education teachers spend 54% of their contracted work week with students.
- Across the participating districts, special education teachers spent a range of time with students, from 48% to 66%.

Forty five percent of their time is dedicated to indirect activities such as IEP paper/report writing (11%), planning/prep (9%) and meetings (8%).

Activity Chart

Special Education Teachers (All Levels)[33]

Activity	% week spent
Student instruction or support	54%
Total	**54%**

Paperwork/IEP writing	9%
Planning/materials preparation	9%
Collaboration with colleagues (email, phone, in-person)	6%
Personal lunch	5%
Attend meeting (other than IEP or EST)	5%
Attend meeting (IEP)	2%
Paraprofessional management/supervision	2%
IEP testing/assessment	2%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	2%
Parent communication (email, phone, in-person)	2%
Student observation	1%
Medicaid service documentation	1%
Travel	1%
Attend meeting (EST)	1%
Total	**46%**

- Special education teachers spend approximately 10% of their week on paperwork and IEP writing, 10% on planning and prep, and 8% in meetings.

In order to expand the reach of Vermont's most skilled staff, a deep study of what is causing the large amount of time dedicated to indirect paperwork and meetings would be required. To enact the best practices, it requires freeing up the time of the district's highly skilled staff member to spend more time with students aligning that time with their skill set.

[33] Activities with less than 1% of weekly time are not included.

7. Staffing Levels

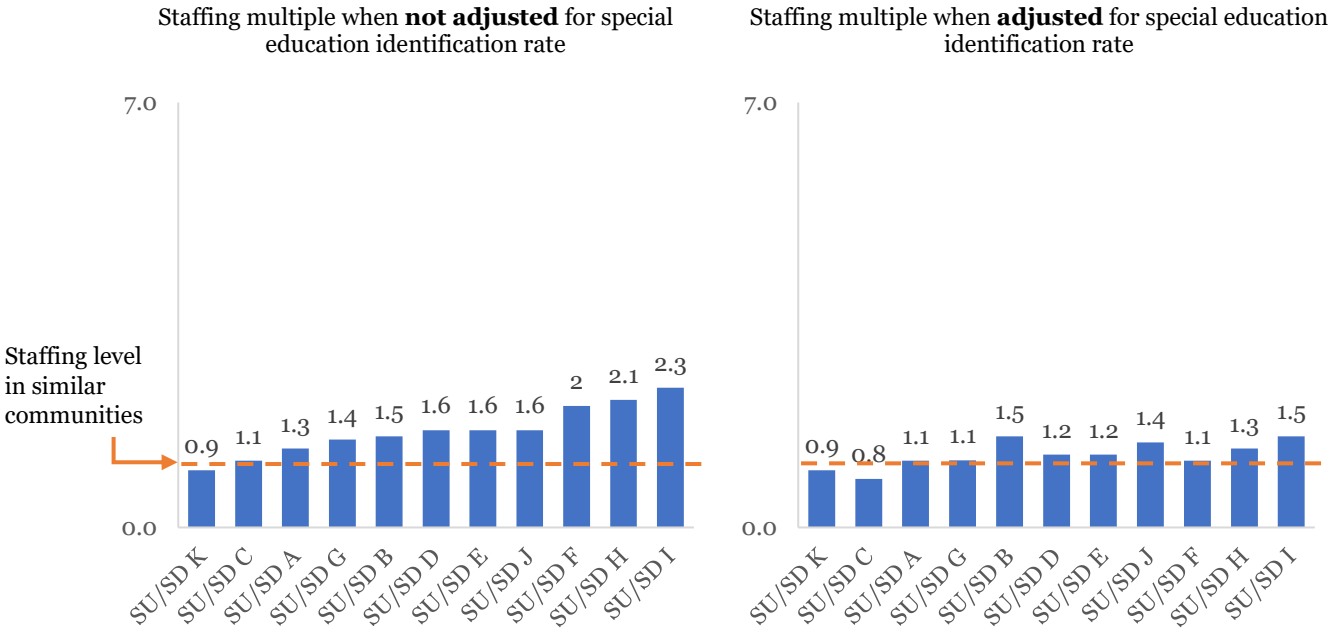
The current practices described in the key findings highlight a shared model across the state that relies heavily on the use of paraprofessionals to facilitate the inclusion of struggling learners into the classroom. Additionally, the perception from general education staff that they do not have the expertise to support the struggling learners in their class is further adding to the resource heavy model across the participating SU/SDs.

Each participating SU/SD received a benchmarking analysis, comparing their current staffing levels of special education teachers and paraprofessionals to similar communities across the nation. The SU/SDs were compared to districts that shared similar levels of free and reduced lunch rate, student enrollment, and per pupil spending. Most SU/SDs had a special education identification rate higher than the national average of 13%. When benchmarking numbers were adjusted to accommodate more students being identified as eligible for special education services, most SU/SDs were aligned with special education teacher staffing. However, 9/11 SU/SDs had 2-3 times the number of paraprofessionals as similar communities, even when adjusted for identification rate.

The charts below show the benchmarking data prior to adjusting the staffing levels for the SU/SDs' special education identification rate, and after the adjustments.

<u>Staffing Multiple Compared to Like Communities Nationwide</u>

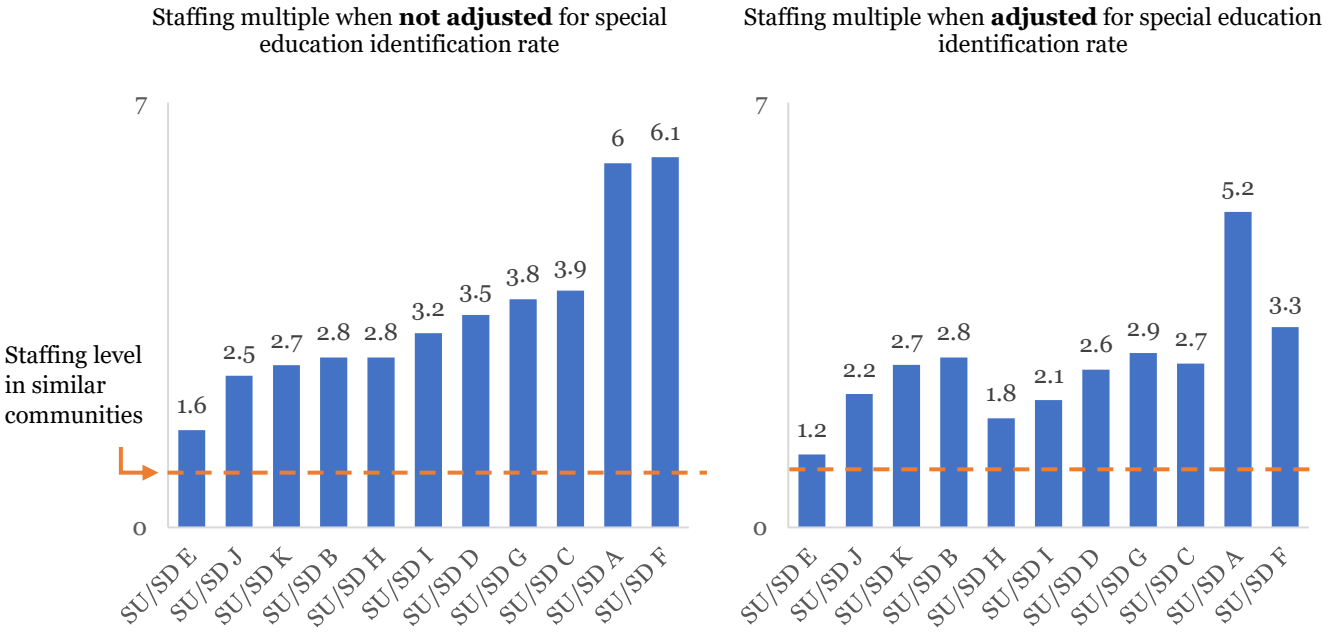
Special Education Teachers (All Levels)



- When staffing levels are adjusted for a special education identification rate that is above the national average (13%), many SU/SDs were between a 1 and 1.5 multiple of their special education teacher staffing levels, compared to like communities.
- When the figures are not adjusted for identification rate, the multiples were higher compared to similar communities.

Staffing Multiple Compared to Like Communities Nationwide

Special Education Paraprofessionals (All Levels)



- When compared to like communities regarding paraprofessional staffing levels, 9/11 of the SU/SDs were a multiple of 2x or more even when adjusted for identification rate.

If per pupil spending, enrollment, and free and reduced lunch rates were consolidated[34] for the participating SU/SDs to model one large district for benchmarking purposes, this combined district would have 1.5 times as many special education teachers as like communities, and 3.1 times as many paraprofessionals. When adjusted based on a weighted special education identification rate, special education teachers were at a multiple of 1.2 times like communities, and paraprofessional staffing levels were at a multiple of 2.4 times like communities.

Vermont SU/SD Staffing Levels Compared to Like Communities Nationwide[35]

Special Education Teachers and Special Education Paraprofessionals (All Levels)

	FTE per 1,000 students	Like communities	Multiple
Special education teachers	14.93	9.74	1.5 x
Special education paraprofessionals	36.8	12.1	3.1 x

[34] Per pupil spending, enrollment, and free and reduced lunch rate were all weighted to provide an accurate profile.
[35] Staffing levels in the chart represent the staffing levels unadjusted for identification rate.

- Compared to like communities nationwide, the participating Vermont SU/SDs had approximately 1.5 times the number of special education teachers.
- Compared to the same like communities nationwide, the participating SU/SDs had 3.1 times the number of special education paraprofessionals.

Since Vermont is a state that is focused on a full-inclusion model, staffing levels were also compared to that of Connecticut, which has a similar full-inclusion special education model. The staffing model analysis was based off of work done by the Connecticut Legislation on a study of paraprofessional and special education teacher staffing levels.[36]

The report found that the state of Connecticut has an identified student to special education teacher ratio of 15:1[37]. Based on the staffing levels of the participating SU/SDs, the identified student to staff ratio of the group was 11:1, or 1.36 times the number of special education teachers as compared to a state with a similar support model.

For special education paraprofessional staffing levels, the state of Connecticut had an identified student to paraprofessional ratio of 7:1. Based on staffing levels of the participating SU/SDs, the identified student to paraprofessional ratio was 4.5:1, or 1.57 times the number of paraprofessionals compared to a state that also supports full inclusion.

Vermont SU/SD Staffing Levels Compared to Connecticut Staffing Levels

Special Education Teachers and Special Education Paraprofessionals (All Levels)

	Vermont[38] Special Education Student to Staff Ratio	Connecticut Special Education Student to Staff Ratio	Vermont Staffing Multiple Compared to Connecticut
Special education teachers	11:1	15:1	1.36 x
Special education paraprofessionals	4.5:1	7:1	1.57 x

- When staffing levels were compared to Connecticut, which also has a full inclusion special education model, the participating SU/SDs had 1.36 times the number of special education teachers compared to Connecticut.
- Similarly, when compared to Connecticut, the participating SU/SDs had 1.57 times the number of special education paraprofessionals.

Virtually all staff, leadership, and communities of participating SU/SDs showed a commitment to serving children, and an open-mindedness to improving their supports and services. With

[36] Connecticut General Assembly. "School Paraprofessionals Staffing." Legislative Para Staffing Study Recommendations. December 17, 2014. Accessed June 18, 2017. http://aftct.org/sites/aftct.org/files/pri_para_staffing_study.pdf

[37] The student portion of the ratio only includes students identified to receive special education services.

[38] Staffing levels based off of data provided by 11 participating SU/SDs.

some help and guidance, SU/SDs can turn the opportunities outlined above into reality without needing to increase overall staffing levels.

Appendix I: DMGroup's Approach to Best Practice

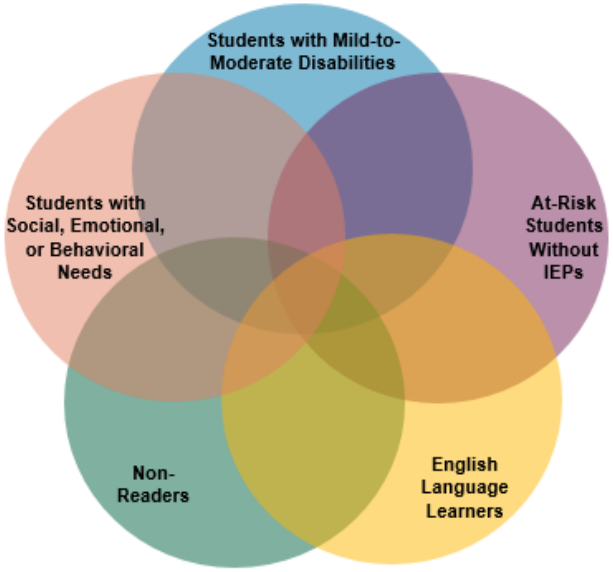
District Management Group (DMGroup) pairs experience of partnering with more than 100 school districts around the country with best practice research. There is no silver bullet to improving the outcomes for students who struggle, yet by thoughtfully applying these best practices in a coordinated, systematic way, high achievement, lifelong independence, social and emotional health and high levels of inclusion is possible.

While many of these best practices are widely accepted among educators and often are seen as 'common sense,' faithful and effective implementation of these best practices is hard and requires a measured, coordinated systems thinking approach.

A Broad Definition of Students who Struggle

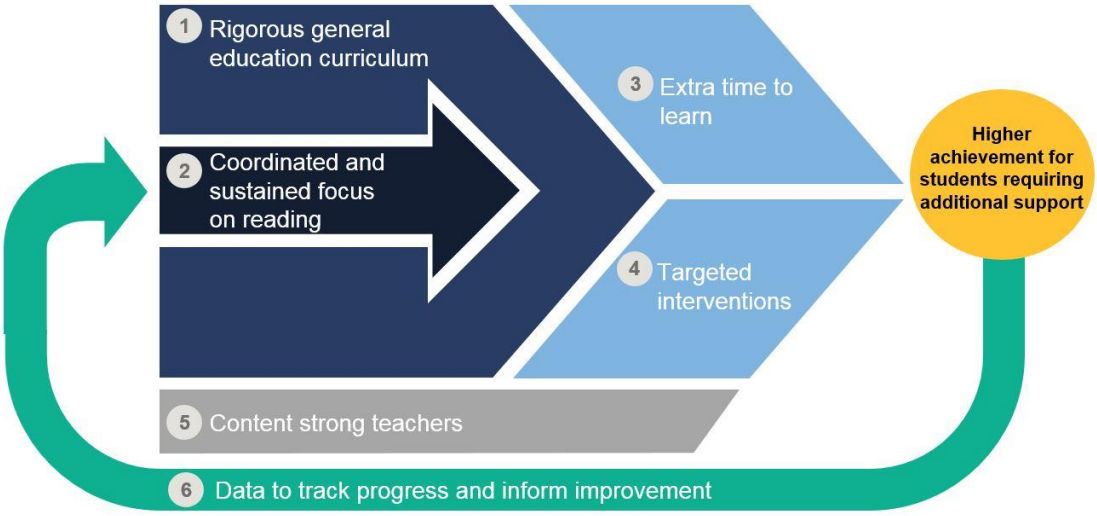
DMGroup intentionally uses a broad definition of students who struggle, which includes students with mild-to-moderate disabilities, students behind in math or who struggle to read and comprehend well, at-risk students who have not yet been identified for an IEP, English Language Learners, and students who have social, emotional, or behavioral needs.

It is important to note that some students on the autism spectrum, or students with severe disabilities, cognitive disabilities, or virtually no English or limited/interrupted formal education from their native countries will benefit from other best practices, not covered in this document



DMGroup's Framework for Supporting Struggling Students Academically

Six interconnected best practices can help students requiring additional support achieve high levels of success in a cost-effective manner.



1

Rigorous general education curriculum

- General education impacts all students; there is a high correlation between successful general education outcomes and successful special education outcomes.
- High expectations matter.
- Coaching is a highly effective professional development tool for teachers.

2

Coordinated and sustained focus on reading

- Reading is the gateway to all other learning.
- The identification of struggling readers should begin in Kindergarten and continue at each transition.
- Students should receive at least 90 minutes / day of balanced literacy instruction at the elementary level.
- A balanced approach to literacy should include the explicit teaching of phonics and comprehension at the elementary level; explicit instruction in reading at the secondary level when required.
- Put one person in charge of reading.

3

Extra time to learn

- Struggling students should receive additional time to learn daily.
- Students should receive at least 30 min / day additional time for all struggling readers at the elementary level, and at least 60 minutes / day or one additional period of math, ELA, or reading at the secondary level.

4

Targeted interventions

- Struggling students should receive interventions that target specific skill gaps.
- Intervention should be tightly connected to core curriculum and instruction.
- Students should be dynamically grouped based on skill gaps.
- Training and background of the instructor, the length of intervention time provided, and the type of instruction presented during intervention are more significant factors for increasing student achievement than intervention group size.

5

Content strong teachers

- Nothing matters more than the effectiveness of the teacher.
- Students who struggle should receive targeted support from staff highly skilled in the content area they support that have a proven track record of success.

6

Data to track progress and inform improvement

- Performance data should be frequently used as a measure of student progress and inform instruction.
- Common benchmarks should be established to have a consistent approach to identifying the needs of students.

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Appendix II: Methodology

The review is designed be comprehensive and inclusive while ultimately creating just a short list of commendations and opportunities. The diagnostic findings draw on both in-depth qualitative input from teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals and parents and detailed schedules provided by all individuals in the included roles. Hard data and school visits round out the leaning process. The process allows representative staff members from each role to share confidentially about what is working well and what could be improved.

The superintendent, members of the cabinet, special education administrators, curriculum leaders, principals and other members of the leadership team were interviewed.

Additionally, through the focus group process, teachers, paraprofessionals and parents (optional focus group) were provided an opportunity to share feedback and insights into current practices within the district. This inclusive process allowed DMGroup to engage with a wide array of SU/SD leaders, staff, and parents and was particularly insightful in learning about how students are served across the SU/SD.

The SU/SD leadership decided which staff roles should be included in the focus groups and schedule sharing. Participants included nearly all staff who work with struggling students, both with and without an IEP. The following roles were included in the study, where applicable:

Role	Participated in Schedule Sharing	Participated in Focus Groups
BCBA/Certified Behaviorist	✓	✓
Behavior interventionist (Para)	✓	✓
Academic coaches		✓
ELL teacher	✓	✓
General Education paraprofessional	✓	✓
General education teacher – elementary		✓
General education teacher - secondary		✓
Guidance counselor	✓	✓
Interventionist (reading and math)	✓	✓
Occupational therapist	✓	✓
Occupational therapy assistant	✓	✓
Psychologist	✓	✓
Physical therapist	✓	✓
Reading Recovery teacher	✓	✓
School clinician	✓	✓
Speech and language pathologist assistant	✓	✓
Social worker	✓	✓
Special education paraprofessional	✓	✓
Special education teacher	✓	✓
Speech and language pathologist	✓	✓
Speech and language pathologist assistant	✓	✓
Title 1 interventionist	✓	✓

Sharing a typical weekly schedule

All selected staff were requested to share their actual weekly schedule during the weeks of 3/27/17 or 4/7/17. Staff received an email invitation to share their schedule through an online tool, dmPlanning, and were provided one week to complete the process. Technical support was offered both via email and over the phone to all staff.

All participating staff who shared their schedule also had the opportunity to share what, if anything, the schedule didn't fully capture and any input or ideas they wished to share as well.

The majority of staff members who were asked to share their schedules did so (93%). Forty-four schedules were excluded due to being incomplete; this analysis includes the schedules of 1,104 staff members.

Analyze the data

All practitioner schedules were analyzed to answer questions such as:

- How much time is devoted to supporting students, attending meetings, doing paperwork, and other tasks?
- What topics are being supported?
- How many students are being supported at a time?
- How much variation or consistency is there between staff with like roles?
- How are students with disabilities served similarly or differently to students without disabilities?

Identify strengths and potential opportunities

A great deal of data was collected leading to this draft report for sharing, feedback and refinement.

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