

Expanding and Strengthening Best Practice Supports for Students who Struggle in Vermont

The process

During the 2016-2017 school year eleven supervisory unions and supervisory districts (SU/SDs) 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. Each SU/SD went through a diagnostic process to compare how their supports compared with research based best practices. 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. Over 500 staff members participated in focus groups and interviews across 40 people days on-site at the SU/SDs. 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.

Recommendations

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

- Across the SU/SDs, 37% of elementary students struggle with reading
- General education teachers reported feeling ill-equipped to support struggling readers
- Current systems rely heavily on paraprofessionals to support students who struggle

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

- Few SU/SDs consistently provide additional time each day to students who struggle K-12
- Many elementary schools pull students out of core classes to provide reading support

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

- Paraprofessionals without strong teaching backgrounds often provide academic support

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

- Many schools noted that resources were limited and teams were unsure how to gain access to expertise in behavior management, addressing the needs of students living with trauma, or other social, emotional and behavioral challenges.

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

- Most schools rely heavily on the use of paraprofessional staff to support students with more intensive special needs

Moving forward

Providing a best practice support model for students with special needs and who simply struggle should not cost more than current levels, in fact, it would either be cost neutral or cost less than current practices. This will, however, require an investment in professional development, tool creation, and technical assistance to support the transition to best practices.

The recommendations will require taking full advantage of current expertise found in the SU/SDs and realigning current systems, beliefs, schedules, caseloads, building assignments and hiring practices. A close partnership between parents, school based staff, building leaders, and central office is required. This is not an effort that can be solely led by special education nor contained to special education.

Most districts in the state are small yet face the same challenges as larger districts. Since the recommendations do represent a systems change in practice, they are not, unfortunately, easy, quick or simple. A shift to this model typically takes 1-3 years of close planning, research, and communication.

Fortunately, many of the challenges and opportunities observed are common across many districts and supervisory unions, although most sense a great deal of “uniqueness”. Joint efforts to move forward and some form of long term sharing of expertise across SU/SDs could be very effective and cost effective. Many SU/SDs will require additional outside support to build capacity and support the shifts in current practices, but they needn’t face the future working alone.

