



South Orange and Maplewood School District

Special Education Opportunities Review

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Introduction

The District Management Council (DMC) has conducted a Special Education and Struggling Students Review on behalf of the South Orange and Maplewood School District. The review focused equally on the academic achievement of students and on the cost effective use of limited financial resources. The study was conducted under the framework of the continuous improvement model. It does not try to determine what is good or bad, but rather creates a road map to help move a district to the next level of performance. This process acknowledges that all systems can improve and that opportunities for improvement are built upon the district's current strengths, history, structure, and resources.

The review compares current practice in the district to best practices drawn from similar systems around the country. It also incorporates a number of well-tested analytical tools. In all cases, the evaluation recognizes that increasing student achievement, managing costs, and respecting children, parents and staff are all important. Addressing one, while ignoring the others, is not an option.

The review also respects the reality that school districts are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. To that end, a small number of high-potential, high-impact opportunities are recommended. A short, targeted plan is more beneficial than a long laundry list of observations, options, and possible actions.

The research includes extensive in-person interviews, online surveys, a deep look at hard data, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices and like communities, and online research. Extensive financial analysis and a review of existing reports and district documents were also conducted.

The Special Education and Struggling Students Review highlights many of the strengths in the district and pinpoints six interrelated opportunities to increase student achievement and reduce costs.

Commendations

The South Orange and Maplewood Public School District has much to be proud of. There are many aspects worthy of commendation, including:

1. Inclusion is embraced both in theory and practice.

Virtually all administrators and teachers in both special education and general education voiced passionate commitment to including all students in the general education setting.

- In surveys, 96% of educators and principals agreed with the statement, “Inclusion is beneficial for most students with mild to moderate special needs.”
- In online surveys, many parents mentioned an appreciation for the inclusion model. According to one representative parent, “We are very pleased with the inclusion model and feel that our children have benefited from it.”
- Schools throughout the district offer inclusion classes across all grade-levels and nearly all classrooms visited provided inclusion settings for students with special needs.
- Nearly every individual interviewed commended the South Orange and Maplewood School District for its commitment to inclusion.

2. Staff have a passion and commitment to ensuring that students with special needs achieve academically, socially, and emotionally at high levels.

Being an educator of students with special needs is a demanding job, especially during times of tight budgets, rising expectations, and as the complexity of student needs grows. In some districts this leads to a sense of defeatism or low expectations. The South Orange and Maplewood staff expressed just the opposite. Staff conveyed commitment to the South Orange and Maplewood Public Schools and a clear desire to improve continuously.

Teachers, administrators and parents are engaged with the district. Online surveys had nearly 200 responses, and interviews were very well attended. Further, parents recognize and appreciate the hard work and commitment of the district’s teachers. As one parent said in an online survey, “We have been enormously pleased with the direct support our child has received from his teacher...She is extremely knowledgeable and caring and always seems to put the needs of children first.”

3. The district has made undertaken significant effort to develop a research-based, district-wide elementary literacy curriculum.

The district has invested significant time and effort into the development of a research-based elementary literacy curriculum, centered on a workshop model. The expansive 120 minute literacy block in each day is in line with best practice for supporting struggling students and, if used effectively, can provide teachers with ample time to ensure that all students reach grade level proficiency.

4. The district’s identification rate for special education is below the state average.

Across the country a wide variation of students are identified for special education, in part because formal eligibility criteria do not exist. In South Orange Maplewood however, the referral rate is on par with the state.

South Orange Maplewood Compared to State and National Referrals

Percent of students identified for Special Education	
South Orange-Maplewood	14.1%
New Jersey	15.5%
United States	13.2%

- The rate of identification in South Orange-Maplewood is below the overall rate for the state.

Importantly, parents are also satisfied with the referral process. In surveys, 72% of parents agreed with the statement, “My child’s initial referral to special education was made at the appropriate time in my child's education.”

5. Reading intervention from content expert teachers is available for some students who struggle.

South Orange and Maplewood School District provides reading interventionists at the elementary level district-wide. Students are identified for intervention based on common formative assessments and teacher referrals, and reading intervention services are taught by teachers with deep expertise in the teaching of reading.

Principals expressed a strong commitment to providing reading intervention. One principal reported in interviews that she increased class sizes slightly and reallocated resources to support a full-time reading interventionist, which is commendable as an innovative use of resources to support struggling students.

6. The district has a system of formative assessments in many grades and subjects.

South Orange-Maplewood School District gathers extensive data to monitor on student learning.

- Interviews revealed that the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is used for all students grades K through 2 several times per year.
- In addition, a number of schools reported that they use the DRA as a means to flag struggling students. This is consistent with best practice on identifying students in need of reading support and remediation.
- In secondary math and ELA, common formative assessments are consistent across teachers and between the two middle schools. These can provide rich data for teachers to review and reflect on effective teaching practice.

7. Read 180 is available as an intervention for struggling readers at the secondary level.

Struggling readers at the secondary level need extra time on task and strong interventions with content expert teachers to catch up to grade level. At the secondary level, South Orange Maplewood makes the Read 180 intervention program available to many struggling students, which is in line with best practice.

Opportunities

The South Orange and Maplewood School District has many areas of strength to build on. Building upon these strengths and recognizing that all organizations can improve continuously, the Special Education Opportunities Review has identified a small number of high leverage areas for raising student achievement and controlling costs.

1. Implement on a consistent basis the district-wide core elementary reading curriculum supplemented by a robust intervention effort.

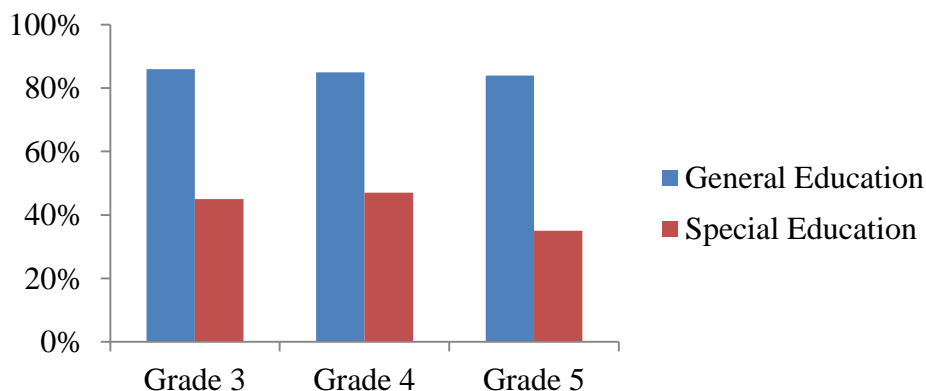
Reading is the gateway to all other learning. Writing, social studies, and science cannot be mastered without strong reading skills. Even modern math is full of word problems; reading and math success are highly correlated. Research has shown overwhelmingly that early intervention in reading can change the trajectory of a student's life; getting low-income students to read at grade level by third grade closes the graduation gap with their wealthy peers and all but assures that they will graduate on time. Few students overcome a reading deficit if they are still struggling at the end of third grade.

School districts in the U.S. have grappled with the dilemma of how to deal effectively with students who are not performing successfully in classrooms, in particular with students having difficulty learning to read. When students begin falling behind their peers in the classroom, the typical first step is to place them in the lowest reading group, thereby slowing down the pace of instruction. These students fall further and further behind and are typically identified as having a developmental delay or specific learning disability. Stronger reading programs that are consistent across the district will provide the extra support needed for students who struggle, thereby reducing the referral rate to special education.

Implementing the district developed core elementary reading program supplemented by a robust intervention effort can be one of the highest impact efforts to raise achievement of students with disabilities. In the long run, it will also help the budget by reducing special education, remediation, and intervention costs.

- Low-income students who cannot read on grade level by third grade are thirteen times less likely to graduate on time than middle-class peers who are on grade-level by third grade.
- Ensuring a child can read on grade level by third grade virtually eliminates the high school graduation gap between rich and poor.

Elementary Proficiency Rates in ELA (NJ ASK, 2010)



- There is a substantial gap between general education and special education proficiency
- This gap grows in 5th grade

1a. Review the implementation of the district’s core reading program at each school and develop a common vision for literacy instruction collaboratively with principals.

In recent years, the school district has implemented many different initiatives to identify and support struggling readers and a common core reading and ELA curriculum so all children can reach grade level. These efforts include: Fountas and Pinnell, the Reading is Fundamental program, the Stars Programs, replacement literacy classes, and reading tutoring for students.

Interviews and school visits suggested that a more consistent approach to implementing the district elementary reading curriculum would ensure that all students who struggle have an equal opportunity to achieve on grade level.

Based on the work of the National Reading Panel (NRP), the What Works Clearinghouse, and the experience of best-practice districts, a proven plan for teaching reading to struggling students includes:

1. Clear and rigorous grade-level expectations for reading proficiency.
2. Frequent measurement of student achievement and growth, influencing instruction and intervention.
3. Early identification of struggling readers, starting in kindergarten.
4. Immediate and intensive additional instruction for struggling readers, averaging 30 minutes a day and using more than one pedagogical strategy.
5. Remediation and intervention that are seamlessly connected to each day’s full class instruction.
6. Balanced instruction in the five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as part of a 90-minute/day literacy block.
7. Explicit instruction in phonics in the early grades and comprehension in the later grades.
8. A skilled teacher trained in reading instruction.

While many of these practices are in place in some classrooms and some schools, there is an opportunity to increase the consistency of reading instruction across all schools. Further, interviews and surveys suggested that some schools' approaches to reading are not fully aligned with best practice for supporting struggling readers.

- Extra time for intervention with is available to very few students (see 1b)
- Reading intervention is typically delivered in place of some core reading instruction, rather than as a supplement.
- Once a student receives an IEP, he or she is often not given the intervention time with a reading specialist.
- Students with IEPs who have fallen behind in reading receive a different, “replacement” curriculum from those students who are reading on grade-level. This curriculum does not have explicit standards of learning and interviews suggested that it is not strongly aligned with the state’s grade level standards.
- Surveys also suggested that teachers are not trained on the replacement curriculum, and it is difficult to deliver while also delivering the core curriculum.

The district should consider a school-by-school review of current reading instruction. Such a review would yield detailed information on the way that reading is currently approached at each school, and could form the basis of a district-wide discussion on how literacy should be taught in accordance with the district curriculum and best practices. Principals could play a central role in this discussion, to ensure that it is implemented with fidelity.

1b. Expand access to trained reading interventionists for all students who struggle by shifting existing resources.

The district has made a significant investment in reading intervention support for struggling students. These individuals are typically reading experts, and support students who are struggling in small groups. This is in line with best practice. Access to these interventionists, however, is limited and varies significantly by school. The district could shift existing resources to expand this effective best practice.

Reading and Math Interventionists by school

School	FTE Interventionists	Students per interventionist
Seth Boyden Elementary	3	175
Clinton Elementary	1.4	364
Jefferson Elementary	0.8	592
Tuscan Elementary	1	595
South Mountain Elementary	1	613
Marshall Elementary	0.4	1,282
Overall	7.6	421

- Overall, there is one interventionist for every 421 elementary students.
- It is not possible for this level of staff to reach all students who struggle. Ideally there would be one reading specialist for every 150 to 200 students.

Interviews with district and school leaders indicated that once a student has been identified for special education, he or she will no longer have access to reading interventionists. This does not need to be so – students who struggle who do not have an IEP and students with mild to moderate disabilities need very similar support.

Fully staffing a district-wide program would require approximately 18 reading teachers district-wide, or 10.4 FTE more than are currently staffed. This cadre of reading teachers could provide 30-60 minutes of daily supplemental instruction to all struggling students, with and without disabilities, over and above their core reading time. Given the tight financial times, these positions must come from shifting existing resources.

1c. Provide more consistent in-school opportunities for all students who struggle to receive extra time on task.

Students who struggle to stay on grade level need more time on task to master grade-level content to catch up and keep up with their peers. Research has shown that this is true for both students with mild to moderate disabilities and students without IEPs who struggle to stay on grade level. The district has developed an extensive ELA curriculum that incorporates many best practices including substantial time on task. Interviews with teachers and principals suggested that none of the elementary schools regularly provide extra minutes of reading to struggling students. Schools do intend to provide a 120 minute literacy block, but a majority of those interviewed shared that it is rare for the full block to be delivered to students. Instead, health class, programs such as D.A.R.E, and enrichment supplant literacy minutes, adding up to substantial lost instructional time.

Though reading intervention is offered, it usually takes the place of part of a student's core literacy block. Given the districts recent development of a core reading program, the logical next step in the evolution would be to address remediation and intervention on a district wide basis.

1d. Review the effectiveness of ‘replacement’ reading curricula to support the most struggling students.

Though the district has made great strides in defining a core district-wide elementary literacy curriculum, interviews suggested that there is significant confusion among teachers regarding ‘replacement’ curriculum called for on some students’ IEPs. When students’ IEPs called for a replacement curriculum, some teachers reported teaching Orton-Gillingham, others Wilson Reading, and most said they did not know what the replacement curriculum was meant to include. Further, teachers and principals suggested that teaching a replacement curriculum to several students at the same time as the core curriculum was a significant logistical and pedagogical challenge.

For students who struggle, rather than offering a separate curriculum, the district might consider offering the same curriculum with additional support through interventionists over and above the core class time.

Financial impact

Implementing a district-wide elementary remediation and intervention reading program may sound expensive. In fact, it would require 18 staff to provide supplemental support. These 18 teachers would cost the district roughly \$1.5M. The district is already spending \$9.4M on supporting struggling students at the elementary level. These resources could be thoughtfully repurposed for supporting a robust, best-practice based reading program.

Cost of a district-wide elementary reading program

	Number
Total elementary school enrollment	3,228
Struggling students (~20%)	645
Number of reading teachers required	18
Average salary	\$84,000
Total cost of reading program	\$1,510,000

Current spending to support struggling elementary students

	Cost
<i>Interventions</i>	
Reading and Math Interventionists	\$ 703,423
Other (Estimated)	\$ 250,000
<i>Elementary Staffing</i>	
Paraprofessionals	\$1,424,641
Special education teachers	\$6,167,124
Speech and language staff	\$ 547,789
Speech and language contracted services	\$ 317,165
Current resources invested	\$9,410,142

- The district is currently spending almost \$10,000,000 on supporting struggling students at the elementary level
- Some of these resources could be thoughtfully repurposed for supporting a robust, best-practice based reading program.

2. Rethink support for struggling students, with and without IEPs, at the secondary level.

Catching students up who have fallen behind at the secondary level can feel daunting. Fortunately, a number of schools have shown that it can be done. Best practice shows that the most effective method to support struggling students is to provide them with extra time on task, and to make sure that this time is spent with teachers with deep subject-specific expertise.

2a. Provide in-school opportunities for all students who struggle to receive extra time on task.

Currently, as students progress through the school levels they receive fewer and fewer minutes of instruction in language arts and math. Middle school students currently receive 58% fewer minutes in language arts and math than do elementary students.

Minutes of English and math instruction, by school level

	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Language Arts	120 minutes	50 minutes	45 minutes
Math	90 minutes	50 minutes	45 minutes

- Instructional time in math and English decline as students age
- This may be fine for students who are on grade level, but struggling students need more time to catch up

There are already some opportunities for struggling students to receive extra time on task. At all three secondary schools, students are able to receive an extra period of math or English if they are struggling. This supplemental class is typically taught by a general education teacher with expertise in the specific subject. In 6th grade, students are able to receive extra periods of both math and English. In grades seven and above, however, students who are struggling in both subjects receive extra time in math or literacy during the school day, and can receive additional instruction in the other subject outside of normal school hours.

If struggling readers have not participated in an effective reading program by 5th grade, they tend to struggle in all subjects. Best practices identified for students in grades K-5 apply to secondary students as well, but with two additions:

- Explicit instruction in comprehension replaces the emphasis on phonics.
- The extra instructional time required increases significantly, up to one or two hours per day to make up for prior lost years.

Currently, the district has some structures in place to provide extra time to secondary students, such as Project AHEAD. Interviews and school visits suggested that a number of students who would benefit from these supports were unable to access them, and that there may be an opportunity ensure the consistent quality of these interventions.

2b. Reconsider the value of resource rooms.

Within a tight schedule where instructional time is at a premium, a resource room period may not be the best use of students' time.

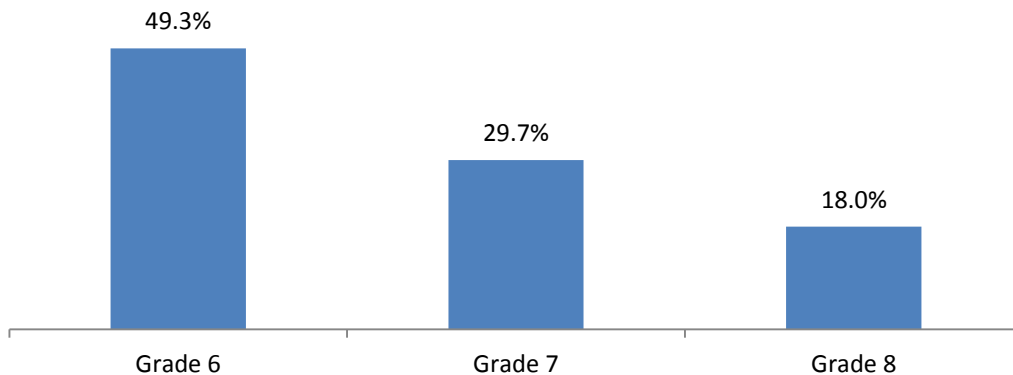
In theory, resource rooms are intended to give students with disabilities time for supplemental instruction and a chance to learn study skills. In practice, however, the organization of a resource room asks a teacher with limited specific content expertise to try to remediate for 4 or more subjects, often at once. A resource room period might have students struggling with multiple subjects and sometimes across several grade levels. This is a nearly impossible situation for even the most effective teacher.

2c. Evaluate the effectiveness of the leveling system for supporting struggling students.

Currently, the district offers a large number of levels for the same course (e.g., 3 – 5 levels of most secondary math courses). The district has an opportunity to consider whether these courses best serve struggling students. More heterogeneous classes have some of the same benefits for struggling students that inclusion classes have for students with disabilities.

One way to assess the current strategy of many levels is through a review of the performance of various sub-groups in the subjects where there are many levels. For students with disabilities, this system does not appear to be working well. Over the course of middle school, math proficiency declines precipitously.

Math proficiency among students with disabilities (NJ ASK, 2010)



A consolidation of levels could give struggling students more opportunity to engage with peers who are performing on grade level. Coupled with supplemental time with a content expert teacher, students would be more likely to reach grade level proficiency. A consolidation of levels would also likely free up resources to devote to intervention, as maintaining 3-5 levels of one class generally makes a schedule less efficient.

3. Expand the number of specialized programs for students with significant needs.

Most parents would prefer that their child with significant needs be educated within the district. This provides stronger ties to the community, neighborhood friendships, opportunities for inclusion with typically developing peers, and a much shorter ride to school.

In most cases a district can run an identical high quality program, rich with specialized support staff and expertise, for about 40% less than an out of district placement, assuming at least three students in a class. The staffing levels and costs are the same, but savings are generated from reductions in transportation, facilities, and marketing costs.

In the past, the district has not had sufficient space to significantly expand in district programs. Recently, more space has become available. Moreover, the district has initiated a number of efforts to reduce the number of new students who must attend out of district programs.

3a. Review the needs of students currently out of district to identify additional opportunities to serve more children in-district.

Currently the district has 2.2% of its enrollment out of district, which is 1.7 times more students than comparable districts nationwide.

Students out of district compared to like communities

	District	Like Communities	Multiple
Number of students out of district (per 1000 students)	22.1	13.3	1.7x

By increasing the number of programs available to students with significant special needs, the district could serve more students, engage more parents, and reduce some uncertainty associated with out of district placements.

A review of out of district placements by disability would likely identify additional in-house program opportunities. At present, the district places students with multiple disabilities, autism, and emotional disabilities out of district in the greatest numbers.

Students out of district* by disability

	Percent of all out of district students
Multiple Disabilities	25%
Autistic	23%
Emotionally Disturbed	18%
Other Health Impairment	15%
Specific Learning Disabled	7%
Cognitive Impairment	4%
Other Disabilities	4%
Communication Impairment	4%

* Does not include students in vocational programs or students who are enrolled in a district school but attend an out of district summer program

- Many districts have had great success serving students with autism and emotional needs in district.
- Placing students out of district for with Other Health Impairment and Specific Learning Disabilities is relatively uncommon, but the district has a number of students with these disabilities served out of district.

Currently the district does serve eleven students in its ASPIRE program for Pre-K-1 grade students with autism. By extending this kind of programming for students, the district could bring some of the more than 30 students with autism back into the district.

3b. Explore new options to better serve students with severe autism and cognitive impairments.

Currently, the South Orange Maplewood School District serves less than 2% of its students in substantially separate classrooms, a considerably lower number than in other districts. Some students with significant special needs, such as those with cognitive impairments, may not benefit from constant and total integration in the general education setting. They could benefit from learning basic life skills before they tackle the specialized content of academic subject classes.

The paradox of a commitment to full inclusion is that for students who need a smaller more specialized environment with partial inclusion there only option often becomes an out of district placement with zero inclusion.

Far from achieving integration and accelerating progress, placing these students in a regular classroom can inhibit learning and fosters isolation. Their only teacher and friend is often their aide. They work on different assignments than the rest of the students. Stories from other districts exemplify the challenge of cognitively impaired students in general education settings. For example, in a different district, we observed a student with significant special needs colored a picture of a boat while the rest of the class wrote an essay on Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It can be equally unhelpful when these significantly disabled students receive the same

assignment as the rest of the class. The students then wait passively while their aide writes a haiku or completes a math exercise for them.

While it is difficult to generalize, since IEPs should be individualized based on each student’s needs, a few options could be considered when appropriate and with full parental involvement and agreement. For students with significant disabilities:

- Define what skills will most benefit the student, including socialization, life skills, basic money management, personal hygiene, or communication.
- Provide direct instruction during at least part of the day in these targeted skills. This will likely be in a pullout setting.
- When (in a few cases) grade-level content isn’t practical, provide instruction based on student ability and need.
- Provide inclusion and social interaction opportunities during non-academic times of the day.

Some of this instruction is more effective in a partially separate setting.

Financial implications

Upgrading and expanding in house program will provide students more opportunities for neighborhood friendships, a shorter bus ride, and access to grade-level standards than does the typical private placement.

Most districts find they are able to provide equally high-quality programs as those provided out of district, with similar levels of staffing. If the South Orange and Maplewood School District were to bring just half of their students with autism back into the district, it could save about \$1.6 million dollars annually.

Tuition savings

Type of Disability	Average out of district tuition	Typical cost to serve in district	Tuition savings per student
Autism	\$72,196	\$30,000	\$42,196
Emotionally Disturbed	\$51,927	\$30,000	\$21,927
Other Health Impairments	\$48,565	\$20,000	\$28,565
Specific Learning Disability	\$43,430	\$20,000	\$23,430

Savings from transportation

Out of district transportation cost per student	\$11,350
Cost to transport student with special needs in-district	\$6,000
Savings per student	\$5,350

Savings if 50% of targeted student return to district

Disability	Savings
Autistic	\$700,000 - \$900,000
Emotionally Disturbed	\$300,000 - \$400,000
Other Health Impairments	\$300,000 - \$450,000
Specific Learning Disability	\$100,000 - \$200,000
Total	\$1,400,000 - \$1,950,000

Implementation considerations

Ensure quality and effective management of new programs.

There is no benefit in building programs that are not excellent and much downside. Students will not be better served than in the out-of-district placements, and parents will not be satisfied. Managing a program for students with severe special needs requires managerial, educational, and financial expertise.

Given the size of the programs needed and the extent of the savings possible, the district could consider putting in place dedicated program management and oversight. This includes hiring a senior level manager, parent liaisons, and other critical roles. For emotional disturbances programs there is typically leadership from clinicians and skilled behaviorists and autism programs require experts in the field.

Some districts have partnered with well-established providers of these programs, moving “out-of-district” programs in house. This provides excellent training for district staff as well.

1. Building a program in house begins with identifying the disabilities that are most frequently served out of district.
2. The district must identify the resources necessary to provide high quality service to students with these special needs including sites of the programs, staffing needs, facilities, and transportation.
3. Communication around the expansion of programming—especially with parents, principals of the schools in which the programs will be located, and teachers who will staff these programs—is critical to success.
4. Ensure dedicated management and oversight.

4. Provide more inclusion options district-wide.

The school district has a strong commitment to co-teaching, the pairing of a general education teacher and a special education teacher together in a general education classroom. For many in the district, co-teaching is synonymous with inclusion.

Many other school systems have embraced inclusion but do not require the need to have co-teaching, and have used other models of providing students with extra time and extra help.

4a. Reconsider the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of co-teaching.

The current design of co-teaching has some benefits and a number of significant drawbacks:

Benefits of co-teaching	Drawbacks of co-teaching
<p><i>Special educators can form deep connections with a small number of students</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In SOMSD, the average teacher in an inclusion or resource room supports 8 students per year. This allows them to connect deeply with these students. <p><i>Special education co-teachers often have expertise in pedagogy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special education co-teachers are often well-trained in designing accommodations to help each student learn. They can provide this expertise to their general education counterpart. <p><i>Special education co-teachers can help ensure compliance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because of their role in drafting IEPs, co-teachers can help ensure that the IEP is followed. <p><i>Allows the special education teacher know and learn the core curriculum</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because special education teachers spend most of their time in general education classrooms, co-teaching ensures that there is consistency in curriculum across general and special education teachers. 	<p><i>Co-teaching does not provide extra time on task</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students in a co-taught classroom do not typically receive extra time to learn. Rather, a co-teaching model provides extra instructors for the same amount of time. <p><i>Co-teaching does not provide extra help from content expert teachers.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews suggested that many co-teachers do not have content expertise in reading, math, or science, which will likely make it difficult to support struggling students. At the elementary level, though the content is more basic, the teaching of reading is in fact a highly specialized skill that requires extensive training. Interviews suggested that special education co-teachers do not all have extensive training in the teaching of reading. <p><i>Co-teaching limits the number of students to whom the district can provide extra support.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Because they are working within the confines of a master schedule and there are typically only a few students with disabilities in a given classroom, co-teachers can only provide support to a limited number of students. In SOMSD, the typical co-teacher supports 8 students with IEPs. Other service delivery models allow more struggling students to get help, including students without IEPs. <p><i>Co-teaching is difficult to implement well.</i></p> <p>Co-teaching requires many pieces to fall in place, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common planning time between the general education and special education teacher Content expertise on the part of the special education teacher. A choice to work together A natural ‘chemistry’ in the classroom between the two teachers Intentional incorporation of the special education teacher into the instruction (i.e., not using the special education teacher as an aide)

Interviews with school staff and school visits indicated that significant variation exists in the practice of co-teaching, and the conditions above are not generally met. Many teachers described rarely having common planning time with their co-teacher. Principals and teachers described special education teachers who were assigned to multiple subjects and multiple teachers in a single year. They were asked to teach in subjects for which they had very little background or training. In some classroom visits, there were instances in which the co-teacher appeared to be assuming a role similar to that of an aide—walking around the room, sitting next to students, but not teaching a lesson.

Given that research has mostly shown that co-teaching, in and of itself, rarely raises student achievement, considering different inclusion settings for students with mild to moderate special needs could present an opportunity to shift resources to inclusion options that will have greater impact on student learning.

4b. Create a wider range of inclusion options.

At times the district finds itself in a self imposed bind. If classroom A is an inclusion class with co-teaching there is a need to cluster students with special needs in this class. Obviously, no district can afford every classroom to have two teachers. If students are identified for special needs midyear, they are required to change classes or receive less support. If the Classroom A is at capacity it can require hiring more staff midyear to create a new co-taught classroom, which typically is not practical. Given that children's needs evolve during the school year, a single option of support through co-teaching can be limiting.

Overview of potential alternative inclusion support models to explore

	Partial day co-teaching (90 - 180 minutes per day)	Pull-out support for struggling students	‘Double-time’ supplemental support for struggling students
Description	Special education teachers push-in to general education classrooms to support for 90-180 minutes per day.	Special education teachers pulls students out in small groups to provide remediation and intervention in addition to core class instruction	A second content classes taught by content expert teacher (often general education teacher) provided in place of some electives for struggling students
Approximate caseload	15-25 students per teacher	20-35 students per teacher	35 students per teacher (elementary), 75 students per teacher (secondary)
Strengths and weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push-in teacher not always content expert • Coordination with general education teacher is difficult • Difficult for special education to provide help and advice while classroom teacher is speaking to class • No extra time on task 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for targeted support for students who are struggling • Pull out teacher not always content expert • Can be hard to link extra help to core instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doubles time on task for struggling students. Provides up to an extra 5 hours a week of instruction. • Class size averages 12-15 students (secondary), 4-7 in elementary • Easier to schedule • Puts content expert teachers in front of students who need great instruction • Can serve both general education and special education students • Easier to link extra help to core instruction, can even be taught by the same teacher.

There are many models to serve students who struggle. The best practice is to give struggling students extra time with content expert teachers. The current model of resource room and inclusion support in SOMSD assigns an average of 8 students a year to a given special education teacher (this does not include paraprofessionals).

Caseload for inclusion and resource room support

Special education teachers in resource room and inclusion	81
Students with disabilities in resource room and inclusion	665
Student to teacher ratio	8.2

- The average resource room or inclusion co-teacher serves 8.2 students per year
- In national research, co-teaching has not been shown to be more effective than other inclusion support models.

Potential savings with revised inclusion support models

	Push-in support for struggling students	Pull-out support for struggling students	Supplemental classes (“double time”)
Students served	665	665	665
FTE required	34	24	14
Current FTE	81	81	81
FTE reduction	47	57	67
Estimated savings	\$3,948,000	\$4,788,000	\$5,628,000

As a partial step towards moving to a new model of academic support, the district could consider shifting away from full day co-teaching to partial day support. If special education teachers supported 16 students between 2 classes each day (with an average of 8 students with disabilities in each class), this would free up more than \$3,000,000 for other uses, while still providing very high levels of support. Thoughtful building-wide schedules would be required.

Impact of partial day co-teaching

	Current	Partial day	Savings
Children supported (est.)	665	665	--
FTE required (est.)	81	42	39
Salary and benefits	\$84,000	\$84,000	--
Total investment	\$6,804,000	\$3,528,000	\$3,276,000

5. Develop a strategic budgeting process for special education.

There is a leadership adage that says, “what gets measured, gets managed.” Given the ever tightening financial environment, the South Orange Maplewood Public Schools would benefit from a defined process to develop, manage, and track special education budget and cost data. As budgets tighten, controlling special education spending will become both more critical and more challenging, making the potential impact of such as system considerable.

The current system which was designed for more typical times does not allow the detailed management of special education resources. One of the themes heard in interviews was that special education funding was difficult to access or project, making staffing and cost management unnecessarily complex. Some specific comments gathered from interviews and surveys were:

- 70% of administrators commented on a lack of transparency in the special education budgeting process.
- A number of interviewees mentioned that there has been difficulty predicting the number of special education students, teachers, and paraprofessionals in the past, making staffing and scheduling unpredictable from year to year.

Regarding staffing, interviews and data revealed several issues:

- In a recent budget cycle, seven new special education teachers were requested after the budget had been completed. Eight special education teachers had been let go the year prior.
- Last year there were 13 requests for new paraprofessionals, a substantial increase in staff.

In order to create an improved special education budgeting process well suited to a time of declining resources, key action steps could include:

5a. Determining what financial and staffing information would be valuable to which stakeholders and when.

Data that will provide key management and staffing requirement insights should be identified with input from those who will be responsible budgeting. This process requires crossing traditional departmental lines, going beyond state required data, and broadening the number of staff involved in financial management and budgeting of special education staff.

5b. Establish roles and responsibilities for special education budget development and staffing.

It is unreasonable to expect the special education director to single-handedly manage all aspects of special education spending and staffing. Big challenges need big teams. A coordinated effort among the business office, other special education administrators, and active participation of the principals will be required. Specific programs and line items should be assigned to individuals to

monitor and manage. This will bring more staff into the effort, and fortunately, the administrators in the district are very capable of stepping up to the challenge.

5c. Establish staffing guidelines based on student needs.

The question of how much special education staff is needed, what type of staff, and in which buildings can be a bit of a mystery, at times devolving into an educated guess. The lack of clear staffing guidelines can lead a sense of inequity or scarcity.

A comprehensive set of staffing guidelines that is based on student needs can allow the district to more accurately budget, more proactively manage expenses and dramatically increase the sense of equity. The setting of such guidelines often requires prolonged, at times difficult discussions amongst central office and building leadership. In the end, all involved will have a greater appreciation for the tradeoffs and complexities involved as well as deep understanding of the staffing guidelines.

Financial Impact

It is impossible to predict with certainty what savings could be achieved with an enhanced special education financial management system. However, based on experience in other districts, an annual savings of \$500,000 - \$1,000,000 per year is possible with a well-defined budget development and staffing process.

Importantly, no additional operating costs would be required to develop this process. Third party facilitation is often very helpful. Time and effort will certainly be required by a number of people across central office and building leadership in order to design this process, so articulated support from the superintendent will likely be necessary to make this effort rise to the top of already long to-do lists. However, over time, most stakeholders will find that time spent upfront very worthwhile.

6. Develop a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and decision-making with respect to special education and struggling students.

There is a sense in the district that, despite significant efforts and a lot of hard work, that there is not a clear and consistent vision for special education across the district and for how the vision should be developed. In interviews, it was often said that despite best efforts, staff and administration do not seem to be communicating as effectively as possible

6a. Develop a common vision and establish a way “things are done” in the district.

Establishing a clear vision and standard operating procedures would go a long way towards creating alignment between central office departments and individual schools. The creation and dissemination of clear policies, procedures, and decisions for areas such as staffing, scheduling, roles, and other areas where schools commonly have questions would help establish consistent operating norms for special education in the district.

Our surveys revealed a consistent lack of understanding on a variety of fronts related to supporting struggling students and those on IEPs.

Special Education Teachers and IEP Team Responses

Which of the following statements concerning students on IEPs do you generally agree with?

	% Agree
The criteria for which services and how much service in my school are very similar to those in the other schools in the district.	48%
The criteria for which services and how much service are clear and well understood by all involved.	46%
The district has clear guidelines for when a paraprofessional is no longer warranted.	22%

In order to make continued progress on this front, numerous channels of communication are needed, including between central office special education administrators and building-based special education staff, between special education leadership and general education curriculum leadership, between building principals and special education staff, and within job alike groups, just to name a few.

Since no one is intentionally not communicating, a formal, scheduled system to share information, air concerns, make decisions, share decisions, and receive feedback on decisions is needed. Since everyone is very busy already, it is suggested that formal communication mechanisms be established.

One way to give staff a chance to share concerns is to establish a “customer satisfaction” survey for all groups who interact with special education students. Results could be analyzed and shared regularly, and used as a means for continuous improvement. In addition, the district could consider implementing cross-departmental meetings in which communication and explanation can take place. While this may require expanding attendance at some meetings, it would also have a significant impact on the level of common understanding district-wide.

6b. Encourage more formal collaboration and greater alignment between special education and other central office departments.

Supporting students who struggle cannot be solely the responsibility of the special education staff; it must be the responsibility of all stakeholders in the district. Aligning efforts between the Business Administration, Curriculum and Instruction, Human Resources, Guidance, Administration, and Special Services office would require more time in the short-run, but greatly reduce frustrations and improve decision making over the long-term.

One example might be, building greater collaboration among those that develop the schedule for students on IEPs. Currently, IEPs evaluations are conducted throughout the year and many are not completed by the time scheduling begins. The result is that the requirements of many students with IEPs are unknown when the schedule is developed leading to a wide variation in class size and insufficient class sections to meet the needs of all IEP students. Focusing efforts on here could have a substantial and positive impact for identified students.

6c. Define clear roles and responsibilities for each central office department and the role of the principals.

People work best together when they know what they and others are responsible for. Serving students with special needs is a complex task that requires leadership and engagement of the building leaders as well as vision and management from the central office. All in the district understand and want this to be a joint effort, but the role and responsibility of each participant is unclear and in turn leads to frustration.

Building a team and creating both shared decision making and shared responsibility for the success of students seldom happens spontaneously. A deliberate plan and actions can create clearer roles and responsibilities, a shared vision and high levels of cooperation. This in turn will increase student achievement and allow the district to better control spending as well. It may be that a series of facilitated discussions would be beneficial.