



**DATE:** 5/12/25

**TITLE:** Special Services Department Update

**TYPE:** Information

**PRESENTER(S):** Sheri Willrodt, Executive Director of Special Services

**BACKGROUND:**

The Special Services Department includes oversight of the following:

- Special Education Services
- School Health Services
- Student Support Professionals (School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists)
- Mental Health Supervision and Supports (internal and external)
- Oversight of education at Nexus Gerard's New Dominion School
- Oversight of education at the Austin Albert Lea Area Special Education Cooperative (AALASEC)

**Support and resources to ensure a safe and welcoming learning environment**

- We are currently at 5 unfilled paraprofessional positions, 2 of which are at our setting IV coop.
- We have filled about half of our professional positions for the 25-26 school year, and are interviewing weekly to fill the remaining openings with quality candidates.
- Our Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) met on April 16 and heard a presentation by IJ Holton SPED Department chair Kaitlyn Meineke on the upcoming schedule change at IJ Holton Intermediate School for the 2025-2026 school year.
- Our Student Support Professionals (School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists) met on April 14 and heard updates on the STAND (Students Taking Action Not Drugs) group, BARR (Building Assets Reducing Risks), the District Response Team, and SAEBRS (Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener).
- County Collaborative/Gerard Mental Health Initiative: These services have now been expanded to include three sites: AHS, Oakland Education Center, and Ellis Middle School. 33 referrals have been processed so far this school year. We have still been unable to access services through Fernbrook Family Center due to their inability to hire a therapist.
- Chemical Health Task Force update: In partnership with Independent Management Services and with parent permission, we are implementing a Teen Intervene cohort at Ellis Middle School and a cohort at Austin High School April 30-May 14. Teen Intervene is a tested, time-efficient, evidence-based program for teenagers (12-17 years old) experiencing a mild or moderate substance use disorder, covering all drugs but with a special focus on alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco use. Students were strategically identified for this cohort based on chemical use related disciplinary referrals.

**Packer Profile for all learners**

- Our Austin Transition Program visited Como Park in St. Paul on April 23 to learn more about horticulture careers.

#### **District-wide multi-tiered systems of support for all learners**

- In the last month, we have had 51 SPED staff complete their science of reading certification through the Online Language & Literacy Academy (OL-LA) and 4 SPED staff complete their certification through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) (in addition to the 22 SPED staff who completed the LETRS certification last year).
- Our District MTSS Team has been working on end-of-year processes for building-level teams to ensure information is retained for fall.
- Our District MTSS Team continues to research integration of BARR, SAEBRS, and EduClimber into our MTSS process.

#### **Excellence in Resource Management**

- We were able to obtain approval this year on our Coordinated Early Intervening Services application and budget. We were mandated to enter into this program due to findings of disproportionately identifying students of Two or More Races under the category of Emotional Behavioral Disorders. The plan submitted involves shifting a portion of the salaries for our elementary counselors/social workers/school psychologists in working with students represented in this category on pre-referral interventions.
- We have submitted our applications for state and federal special education funding for FY25.
- We have submitted our application for setting aside federal special education funds for payment of tuition bills, a strategy recommended by the special education finance specialist at MDE