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To: Shawn Petri, Superintendent

From: Melisa Akers, Director of Special Education

Date: February 3, 2025

Subject: Special Education Update

A Message from our Director, Melisa Akers

January brought its share of health challenges to the CEC and the central office special education team, with several staff members out due to Influenza, Norovirus, and COVID. Thankfully, everyone is back at work, and we're hoping to make it to spring without another wave of illness—fingers crossed!

LINKFEST 2024: A Day of Inclusion & Fun

The annual **LINKFEST** event took place on **January 28th**, bringing together students from across the ISD for a day of fun and connection. **Amy Bontekoe, Peer to Peer Coordinator at Houghton Lake Community Schools**, organizes this incredible event each year, and **COOR proudly sponsors the tubing rentals** at Hanson Hills.

This year's event saw **63 students—both with and without disabilities—participate** in the tubing adventure. The group enjoyed a pizza lunch followed by Mrs. Bontekoe's famous homemade chocolate chip cookies. Rosy cheeks, snowy faces, and big smiles were in abundance!

What is Peer to Peer?

Peer to Peer is an **evidence-based program** designed to foster meaningful **connections between students with and without disabilities**

throughout the school day. By harnessing **natural opportunities for interaction**, Peer to Peer:

- Promotes **belonging for all students**
- Provides **peer education** that increases **understanding and acceptance of disabilities**
- Builds an **inclusive school culture**

If you're interested in learning more about **Peer to Peer**, click [here](#).





A Message from our Principal, Joe Moore

January was another exciting and busy month at CEC & ATC! Our classroom teachers planned engaging and hands-on activities, incorporating sensory play, cooking, and exposure to new languages and cultures.

- **Ms. Pat and her team** led students through a variety of sensory play experiences, including making their own snow from a kit, adding food coloring to real snow, and even creating candy using snow.
- **Ms. Hannah's class** had a blast making personal pizzas. Cooking activities like this help students develop fine motor skills, follow directions, engage their senses, and experience a sense of accomplishment.
- **Ms. Shannon and her team** have been introducing sign language to their students. Learning sign language fosters awareness of the challenges faced by the deaf community, breaks down communication barriers, and introduces students to a unique culture.
- **Ms. Angie's students** put their baking skills to the test by making an apple cake from scratch. The class worked together to follow the recipe and, of course, enjoyed tasting their delicious creation!



One of my growth goals this year is to strengthen the school's connection with parents, families, and guardians. To support this, I will be creating a monthly newsletter that highlights the incredible activities happening in our classrooms. This newsletter will be emailed to parents and guardians and posted on the COOR ISD website. You can find the [→most recent edition here.←](#)

Over the past few months, we have successfully filled several paraprofessional vacancies at CEC & ATC. Please join me in welcoming **Abbey Zimostrad, Cheyenne Harris, Gwyneth Murray, Emily Boersen, and Erika Rajaniemi** to our team! Additionally, we are excited to welcome our newest hire, **Bonnie Zabel**, who joined us on Monday (2/3) and is now part of **Tracy Hendershott's classroom** at CEC. With just a few vacancies remaining, we are hopeful to find qualified individuals soon.

A special **congratulations** to the incredible team in **Ms. Cheri's classroom** for their outstanding attendance this school year! **Courtney, Jessica, and Gwyn** have a combined total of only five absences—an impressive display of commitment and

reliability. Their dedication does not go unnoticed, and we truly appreciate their hard work.

A Message from our Special Education Technical Assistance, Nicole Grace

Northern Autism Network (NAN) Engagement & Special Education Training Updates

This past month, we had the privilege of hosting the **Northern Autism Network (NAN)** for their second in-person meeting of the year. As representatives of this group, **Amber Larrison and I** work to support four key priority areas aimed at enhancing services for Autistic students across the ISD:

- **Professional Development & Resource Dissemination**
- **Establishing a Coaching Structure**
- **Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices through Coaching**
- **Peer-to-Peer Support**

As part of these efforts, we actively pursue **grant funding through START** to expand programs, training, and services. This spring, NAN funds will support **four professionals and two parents of Autistic students** in attending the **Annual START Conference in Lansing**. With a focus on communication, this opportunity will help establish an **Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) Implementation Team** within the ISD.

Additionally, we recently welcomed **special education teams from Grayling, Mio, West Branch-Rose City, and Houghton Lake** for training on the **Educational Benefit Review Process**, facilitated by **Melisa, Brenda, and myself**. This process is crucial for assessing student progress within the general education curriculum and evaluating the effectiveness of their **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)**. It serves as a valuable tool in complex cases and when considering placement changes, ensuring that students receive the **maximum educational benefit**.

We look forward to continuing these efforts to strengthen our support systems for students, educators, and families!

A Message from our Early On Coordinator, Michele Cochrane

Early Childhood Updates & Initiatives

We currently have **50 students enrolled**, with **38 new referrals** received in the **second quarter of FY 2024-25 (Oct-Dec)**. Referral breakdown by district:

- **12** from HLCS
- **11** from CASD
- **9** from WBRC
- **4** from RAPS
- **1** from Mio-AuSable

- 1 from Fairview

Upcoming Training & Presentations

On **February 24th**, **MiLEAP personnel** will visit our ISD to provide an **in-person Early On Medicaid training**. Recent updates to the Medicaid Manual have introduced new billing codes that expand reimbursement opportunities for Early On services. These newly covered services include:

- Skills training and development
- Developmental delay prevention activities
- Family training
- Assessment of home, physical, and family environment

Additionally, on **February 22nd**, **Michele Cochrane (Early On Coordinator) and Tammy Baudoux (Occupational Therapist)** will present at the regional early childhood conference, *Building Blocks for Kids*. Their session on **Inclusion in Childcare and Preschool** will highlight the [All Together Now](#) childcare inclusion modules, which are available for free on the CCRESA Early On Training and TA website. They will also share the [Preschool Collective Action Plan](#) (developed in 2022) and collaborate with providers on strategies to foster inclusive environments where all children can thrive.

Help Me Grow Pilot Initiative

COOR ISD is participating in Cohort 2 of the Office of Special Education's **Build Up/Help Me Grow Pilot**. Beginning in **March**, COOR ISD will be integrated into [Help Me Grow](#), enhancing coordination of Child Find efforts for children ages 3-5. This initiative is a **collaborative effort** between our ISD Early Childhood departments and LEA Special Education teams, aiming to:

- Strengthen **Child Find processes** for preschool-aged children
- Improve **educational outcomes** for young learners
- Foster **stronger professional relationships** across districts

Although the pilot is focused on Preschool Special Education Child Find, Help Me Grow will also connect families with referrals and resources for additional services. **Michele Cochrane and Amber Larrison** are leading this initiative.

These efforts reflect our commitment to **enhancing early childhood services, expanding access to resources, and ensuring that all children receive the support they need to succeed in their early years.**