



Special Education Report September, 2025

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Administrators for Accountability & Program Improvement (T. Hassett, M. Sly, J. Pung):

- **General Supervision Grant Team Updates:**
 - Special education directors will come together on September 12th for our monthly coordinators meeting. This month, we will focus our learning on the role of the new Engagement Consultants, who will share how they can support students with disabilities around the county.
 - Trisha and the GSM team have scheduled meetings with all of our local districts to review the district data portraits and further develop the activities and strategies connected to our General Supervision System. The purpose of these meetings is to collaboratively identify needs, goals, activities, and professional learning opportunities that will lead to improved student outcomes and allow districts to provide input about the development and alignment of ISD services that support district goals.
 - The GSM team met with the general education department to discuss activities and strategies to serve staff and students more collaboratively
- **Ancillary Team Updates and Upcoming Trainings:**
 - Infinity's new user training part two was held on August 28th.
 - Ancillary staff will participate in Alt-Shift training on September 10th. Alt+Shift can assist staff in introducing alternative educational approaches through the use of assistive technology and accessible digital materials.
 - Ancillary staff will participate in Medicaid Training on September 30.
 - We are increasing our use of Learning Stream to manage event participation and gain valuable data on event quality and participation rates.
 - Infinity Virtual Office Hours are scheduled for every other Tuesday through December
 - Engagement Consultants will begin providing Office Hours the week of September 2.
- **New Hires or Current Vacancies**
 - New Hire: Heather Beckett- DHH Interpreter
 - New Hire: Kenya Marion- Contracted Virtual School Social Worker
 - Substitute School Social Workers: Jill Bohne and Cheryl Tennihill



- Current Vacancy: one school social worker position, a new hire in this position would take over the substitute social worker assignment and some of the virtual school social worker assignment
- Current Vacancy: additional behavior coach position

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Program (B. Woolston):

- We are very excited to announce that our ASD Preschool program that was formerly housed at Freedom Acres, has successfully made the transition into Jefferson Elementary. This important move will allow our preschoolers access to typical peers and the general education curriculum, while maintaining their important and intensive services to meet their IEP goals in the areas of communication and behavior. We're very excited to see what this positive change does for our little ones this school year and beyond!
- We are also excited to announce a rebrand of our ASD Consultant role. They will now be called Engagement Consultants. This shift is meant to highlight the fact that the vital services these highly skilled professionals provide in the areas of behavior, engagement and skill acquisition are now available to ALL students in the county who are eligible for special education, regardless of their disability/eligibility. This is a necessary shift as the landscape of education shifts to providing inclusion in the least restrictive environment for all students, and we become more behavior and trauma informed. We are very excited to begin helping teams in our local districts better plan for and serve our most needy students this year!
- Once again, we are beginning this school year with all of our ASD programs staffed by either a highly qualified teacher, or a highly qualified substitute who is actively pursuing their ASD endorsement. Here are our new hires for fall:
 - Sara Preston - ASD Teacher at AEC
 - Elizabeth Dreja - Engagement Consultant
 - Evelyn Rockey - HCA at AEC
- We are also still seeing a good deal of upward mobility within the department. We have dedicated and motivated staff who have chosen to pursue training and education in order to take advantage of opportunities at the ISD. Position changes:
 - Cindy Zamarron - HCA mentor to Engagement Consultant. Cindy was also formerly an HCA, and she will be completing her graduate degree in ABA this December.
 - Megan Ruid - HCA to ASD teacher at AEC in our transition age classroom. Megan is a BCaBA with a bachelor's degree in ABA, and is pursuing her Master's in Education and her ASD endorsement.
 - Maria Olvera - ASD teacher at AEC to Engagement Consultant. Maria has a Master's in Education and is a BCBA. She has a wealth of clinical and supervisory experience outside of the classroom, and will be an amazing asset to IEP teams



throughout the county. Additionally, Maria is pursuing her administrative certification.

- Erin Scarborough - HCA to HCA Mentor. We're very excited for Erin to begin spreading the knowledge and skills she possesses as a paraeducator to paraeducators throughout the county.
- ASD Coaches - Our annual coaches training series begins on September 9th. The topic this year is Inclusion within the Least Restrictive Environment. This series of trainings is funded with our annual START grant.

Early Childhood Programs (C. Granzo):

Summary of Early Intervention and DPIL Programming 24-25 School Year

The Early On program serves children between the ages of birth to age 3. Children have developmental delays and/or established conditions that make them eligible for early intervention services. The data points used for this data review was from July 1 of 2024 to June 30, 2025.

There were a total of 339 referrals to the program this project year. Of those 3 were for children that resided in a different service area and 4 were a duplicate referral.

This left 332 referrals to respond to of which:

31 were referred to their local district as they were over age 3.

8 moved prior to the evaluation being completed

29 are in process of evaluation at the time of the data capture

31 were unable to contact

54 were not interested in an evaluation and/or services

46 of the total referrals or 14% were drug exposed infants (primarily THC), 9 or 20% of these families engaged in services.

Of the 172 that were evaluated:

7 were evaluated and determined not eligible

8 were eligible but declined prior to development of an IFSP



155 that resulted in an IFSP

2 the evaluation was started and not able to be completed

29 additional children were still in the evaluation process at the time of the data capture.

District	2023 - 2024	2024- 2025	Eligible	In-eligible	Moved, declined , unable to find	Referred to Build- UP	In Progress	Drug Exposed
Belding	64	78	38	3	28	6	3	14
Ionia	128	95	43	2	31	13	6	16
Lakewood	51	63	34		17	9	3	4
Portland	41	55	27	1	20	4	2	6
Saranac	21	27	16	1	6	0	4	4

End of year count June 2025 count data indicated there were 194 children eligible this was similar to end of year 2024 which was 197. The number of children served in a one-year period of time by the Early On program was 355.

Here are a couple comments for families that exited the program this year. I think they epitomize our tag line of Support. Empower. Thrive.

“Emily was always wonderful in making sure that the things we were working on fit into our lifestyle and how my son operated. She also came up with things to try and get him out of his comfort zone, that pushed him farther and got him to make bigger progress steps.”

“It was so helpful having Amanda meet us wherever we were whether it was at our house or the park. It is very helpful having Amanda teach me techniques to use with my son while also including the other kids.”



“Dana is very knowledgeable. Her input on physical exercises helped my daughter thrive. Her input and session notes were the only thing that convinced my daughter's doctor to place a lifesaving ENT referral, and due to that my daughter is now healthy and thriving for the first time in her entire life. Her advocacy for my daughter saved her.”

Point of Interest: I have been tracking the average age of referrals for the past 5 years. We have gone from 16 months in 2019-2020 down to 13 months this year in 2024-2025. Prior to this back another 10 years the biggest referrals were for kids age 2 and not talking. I think the local family doctors are doing a great job of using screenings on a regular basis and are no longer advising to “wait” but making that referral. Now many of the referrals for younger infants are for those who have motor delays and or feeding concerns. This means children are in the program longer and many of them move to show delays in other areas such as communication as they get older.

Playgroups We did operate our targeted weekly inclusive groups this year in Belding (Orchard Hills), Ionia (Welsh-HS programs) and Portland (Taggarts). The playgroups are literacy focused and designed to support language and developmental skills via specific and repeated learning opportunities. The groups are inclusive in that there are children that are eligible for Early On and MMSE but the groups are also opened up to families in the community to enroll and participate for a nominal fee of \$25.00 for a three-month session. A total of 76 children participated in the playgroups, Belding 26, Ionia 30 and Portland 20. We do accept families from Lakewood and Saranac into any of the playgroup locations.

Dolly Parton Imagination Library of Ionia County With respect to the Dolly Parton Imagination Library of Ionia County, data points are for the 2024 calendar year. On average there were 1991 books mailed each month during this period of time. The average costs per month was \$4,367.54, costs for the entire year was \$52,410.47. A total of 23,896 were distributed to homes in Ionia County during 2024 A total of 2482 children received books!

Distribution data for a one-month snapshot totaling 1923 books (7/25) indicates the following for each school district:

Belding 432, 22%; Lakewood 305,16%; Saranac 151, 8%; Portland 391, 20%Ionia 644, 34%

Monthly Distribution:

June	1928	29	\$4357.33
July	1926	40	\$4411.57
August	1949	67	\$4539.33



Freedom Acres School Programs (A. Miller):

2025–26 School Year Updates

Department Updates or Changes

The summer session for the SCI (Severely Cognitively Impaired) program concluded with a thematic unit on *Sea Life* and a celebratory water day.

The 2025–26 school year opened with high energy and collaboration, highlighted by guest speaker Chase Mielke and team-building activities for both SCI and SEI (Severely Emotionally Impaired) staff. These sessions concluded with the development of shared classroom missions and visions using the prompt:

“What will it look, sound, and feel like when Freedom Acres is thriving for every learner and adult this year?”

On August 19, staff showed remarkable flexibility when a power outage shifted the EA workday into a remote planning day. Staff successfully used this time to review IEPs, update health and behavior plans, and finalize data tools.

The first student day, August 20, was marked with joy and community connection through the Kona Ice Truck, generously sponsored by the PTO.



New Hires or Current Vacancies

- **Welcome:** Helen Carigon, new HCA in the SCI program. She brings specialized training in feeding tube care and medical support and has been serving as a long-term substitute.
- **Retirement Announcement:** Lynne Wester shared that she will retire at the end of December. Lynne’s compassion and dedication have been a true gift to Freedom Acres, leaving a lasting impact on students, families, and colleagues.





Highlights of Positive Work by Staff or Students

- Staff engaged deeply in professional development, building collaboration and culture for the new school year.
- Despite the August 19 power outage, teachers demonstrated flexibility and preparedness.
- Students launched the school year with excitement, supported by a joyful PTO event.



New Learning Spaces at Freedom Acres

This year, Freedom Acres is proud to introduce three new specialized learning spaces:

- Life Skills Lab (Classroom 202): Supports SCI and SEI students in building independent living and transition skills, with a focus on peer-to-peer interaction and IEP outcomes.
- Social and Emotional Learning Lab (Classroom 205): Provides space for TRAILS groups, school social worker-led groups, and restorative practice activities, focusing on repairing harm and celebrating student successes.
- Motor Lab (Classroom 305): Rotation-based centers for motor development and regulation. Planning led by Brenda Brown and Jacob Heppe, with Ashley Proctor preparing the space.

Staff are eager to integrate these opportunities into daily programming to enrich learning and well-being.

Initiatives or Grants in Progress

On September 3, Freedom Acres began a collaboration with Rachel Selby, School Outreach Liaison from Right Door. Together, the team is exploring Youth Mental Health First Aid training and TRAILS training, scheduled for the November 14 PD day.

A building-wide calendar will be shared to welcome Rachel and Right Door staff into Freedom Acres as valued partners.

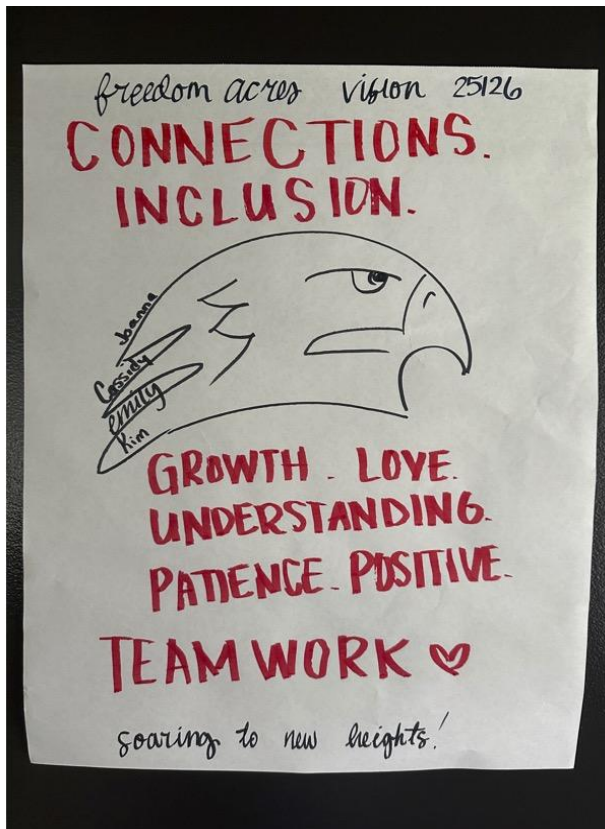


State-Level Work or Involvement

Freedom Acres is developing a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) feedback tool for families. This will provide opportunities for families to share perspectives and guide the creation of resources to help them better navigate and understand LRE decisions.

Past or Upcoming Events That Showcase Programs

- August 18: Staff engaged in vision-building, professional learning, and collaboration during their scheduled professional development, also known as "Opening Day."
- August 20: First day of school with PTO Kona Ice Truck celebration.
- September 8–12: NWEA Testing for SEI students.
- September 24: Annual Freedom Acres 5K (*Rain date: September 25*).



Barriers or Challenges That Need to Be Addressed



- Infrastructure: The August 19 power outage underscored the importance of continued planning for facility and technology resilience.
- Staffing Transition: Preparing for Lynne Wester's retirement requires thoughtful planning to ensure program continuity and smooth transitions for students and staff.

✧ ***Freedom Acres continues to thrive through staff dedication, family partnerships, and a shared commitment to walking beside students on their learning journey.***

PI-OHI & Assistive Technology Department (K. Foote)

- The PIOHI Department welcomes Zoey Firovich to our team. She is assigned at Rather Elementary
- At this time PIOHI has an open position at Saranac El.
- PIOHI HCA's participated in updating their First Aid/CPR credentials on August 19th.



- September 10, 2025 Assistive Technology will be beginning the next phase with Alt + Shift and ISD partnership plan.

Transition Training Sites/MoCI Programs (M. Sly):



- **Transition Training Sites:** No Updates
- **MoCI Programs:** No Updates

Deaf & Hard of Hearing (J. Pung)

- Our team will meet next week with Lauren Denti, our contracted education Audiologist from the University of Michigan, to update student information and work on creating a cohesive schedule of support.
- To support the new LEAD-K (Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Children) legislation, Charity Last will be attending SKI-HI Training in October. The Sensory Kids Impaired Home Intervention (SKI-HI) curriculum is a comprehensive approach to family-centered home intervention for families of infants and young children who are identified as deaf or hard of hearing (DHH).
- We are excited to welcome Heather Beckett as our new DHH interpreter. She has been placed at Portland High School and is replacing Noelle Podoll.
- LEAD-K (Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Children) : We received notification that we will be in a collaborative grant with Kent ISD and Montcalm LEAD K is a state law that comes into effect September 1. The legislation seeks to ensure that children who are DHH have a strong language foundation and are kindergarten-ready when they start school. It applies to children who are DHH and age 5 or younger. The focus of the grant will be on providing training and support to DHH teachers and relevant staff that work with DHH eligible children between birth and five years of age. You can learn more about LEAD K [here](#).

Upcoming Events

September 10-Alt-Shift Training
September 16-Non-Public School Consultation Meeting
September 22-PAC Meeting
October 7-High-Quality MDR Training