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To: Shawn Petri, Superintendent

From: Melisa Akers, Director of Special Education

Date: December 3, 2025

Subject: Special Education Update

A Message from our Director, Melisa Akers:

My team has so many great things to share this month! Since the update is already six pages long, I'm going to defer to their contributions for December. I will include my own updates in the January report.

However, I do want to take a moment to personally thank you again for approving the hire of a full-time nurse for the center-based program. Nurse Q has truly been a game changer. As you'll see in this report, she has accomplished an incredible amount in a very short time. We are deeply grateful for her medical expertise, and the level of anxiety we previously experienced during medical emergencies has decreased significantly since she joined our team.

A Message from our Principal, Joe Moore:

During the November 21st PD day, CEC and ATC staff participated in Ukeru training, a trauma-informed, restraint-free crisis management system designed to support safe and positive behavioral interventions. The training focused on key concepts such as trauma-informed care, verbal and nonverbal communication, and strategies for managing and de-escalating conflict by redirecting or diffusing aggression. Staff also learned how to foster environments centered on Comfort vs. Control and gained a deeper understanding of the traumatic experiences that

may impact individuals with developmental, behavioral, and mental health needs. In addition to the conceptual components, the training included protective blocking techniques to help ensure safety during episodes of physical aggression. This system is intended to promote the safety and dignity of all students and staff. For more information on Ukeru, please visit

www.ukerusystems.com.



A Message from our School Nurse, Emily Quinlan

Educational Center Health Office (ECHO) Update:

This school year has brought important growth within the new emerging COOR ECHO program as we work to enhance safety systems, expand services, and support the needs of our medically complex student population. With a full-time nurse now on site across both CEC and ATC, our team has been able to respond more effectively to emergencies, streamline medical processes, and improve communication and collaboration across all areas of the district. This is a summary overview of the key health and safety initiatives that have been implemented and those that are underway.

Building a Strong Foundation for Emergency Preparedness

Before the school year even began, a fully state-compliant Cardiac Emergency Response Plan was created and submitted, marking the first major step toward meeting Michigan's required annual cardiac response drills. Planning is also underway for the development of a Medical Emergency Response Team (MERT) that will operate with the same structure as existing specialized response groups, such as the Behavioral Crisis Intervention Team. This will ensure that during any medical emergency, trained staff can assume clear roles and respond in a coordinated, efficient manner.

Streamlining Medical Enrollment & Reducing Paperwork Fatigue

A comprehensive review of all medical forms and enrollment processes is underway to simplify paperwork and improve the experience for families. A proposed “triggered wave” system would send home only the initial essential forms first, followed by additional documents only if needed based on student responses. This approach reduces redundancy, eliminates unnecessary overwhelm for families, and helps ensure the school receives accurate, actionable medical information from the start.

Expanding ECHO Capabilities to Better Serve Students

Work continues to ensure that all services the Health Office can safely provide are fully authorized, including point-of-care testing such as rapid viral swabs, urine tests, glucose checks, and more. A major accomplishment this year was obtaining CLIA waivers for both CEC and ATC, allowing school-based testing to be completed on-site in compliance with state regulations. This advancement supports quicker decision-making, reduces lost instructional time, and improves overall access to timely care.

Implementing Competency-Based Staff Training

To build confidence and consistency in supporting medically fragile students, the ECHO has introduced medical skills and procedure competency checklists. These are used to document training for staff who work closely with students requiring specialized healthcare interventions. The long-term goal is to expand the competency system to all relevant staff across both buildings whenever the skill aligns with a student’s IEP or Individualized Health Plan (IHP)—ensuring that no one is left to “wing it” when it comes to critical care needs.

Improved Response to Medical Emergencies Across All Sites

Staff at CEC, ATC, and the Central Office have expressed strong appreciation for having a full-time nurse available on site. Already this year, immediate nursing intervention has been essential during severe seizure emergencies, cardiac-related concerns, and other acute medical incidents. In one instance, early identification of symptoms in an individual led to the recognition of a cerebrovascular accident (stroke), allowing timely medical care and likely improving the outcome. The availability of trained medical assessment has not only improved emergency response but has also helped prevent injuries and reduce unnecessary 911 calls.

Increasing Collaboration With Classroom Teams and Transportation Staff

There has been notable growth in collaboration across all departments, including transportation. With more consistent access to a medical professional, teams are taking a more individualized approach to student needs—particularly during high-risk times of the day, such as arrival, dismissal, and bus transport. Customized, scenario-specific training sessions have helped staff feel more confident in their roles and have strengthened communication systems that support student safety on and off the bus.

Uncovering Critical Medical Information to Better Support Students

The presence of a school nurse during team meetings and problem-solving discussions has led to the discovery of several previously unidentified or undisclosed medical conditions — information that has had a direct impact on student safety and educational planning. Findings this year have included medical changes at home contributing to self-injurious behaviors, new-onset seizures that were later diagnosed as a brain bleed, and the identification of existing seizure-management implants that had not been previously communicated to the school. These insights have allowed staff to adjust supports, refine care plans, and collaborate more effectively with families and medical providers.

A Message from our Compliance Monitor, Nicole Grace:

Professional Activities and Outreach

The last few weeks were focused on professional learning and outreach focused on strengthening special education practices and supporting our districts in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

During the month, we participated in multiple Thrun Law Firm webinars covering special education discipline, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and placement and legal IEP requirements. These trainings provided updated legal guidance and best-practice strategies that directly inform district-level decision-making and compliance. The information gained from these sessions supports our work in developing special education plans that are legally sound, instructionally appropriate, and centered on student needs.

In addition, I attended the annual START Fall Leadership Conference with Amber Larrison. This conference included statewide updates on inclusive practices, behavioral supports, and systems-level planning for students with disabilities. The content strengthens our ability to guide districts in improving service delivery and implementing evidence-based supports for diverse learners.

Community engagement was also a highlight. I attended the Mio Schools Career Fair and had the opportunity to speak with middle school and high school students from Mio and Fairview about careers in special education and speech-language pathology. This outreach supports workforce development efforts by encouraging students to explore careers in education and related services.

Finally, we were fortunate to have two speech pathologists attend the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) Convention in Washington, D.C. This self-funded national conference attendance provided an opportunity to learn from experts, connect with thousands of speech-language pathologists from across the country, and gain insight into emerging research and practices. The information gathered is being shared with our teams to strengthen service delivery and professional growth.

Overall, the professional learning and engagement activities directly support our mission to provide high-quality services and informed leadership to our districts.

A Message from our Early On Coordinator, Michelle Cochrane:

Playgroups

Both the Fairview and Grayling playgroups are very busy this year. The Grayling group added a second session on Fridays to accommodate the higher than usual attendance. Tammy Tyler continues to support the playgroups with monthly Pop-Up Literacy Events. The Crawford County Health Dept is a strong collaborative partner at the Grayling playgroup, providing staffing and keeping parents informed of community events.



Early On staff also attend the Rose City Great Start Playgroup and the Early Head Start Prudenville Playgroup. The Early On providers encourage families to attend and help with questions about developmental milestones and concerns or questions parents may have.

Professional Development

The Fall Early On PLC on October 23 was a great success. In the morning, CCRESA Early On Training and Technical Assistance provided an informative session on evaluations for Early On eligibility. During the afternoon, teams engaged in collaborative discussions on several key topics, including:

- Artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT and Google Gemini
- Assistive and Augmentative Communication (AAC)
- Service delivery and appropriate service frequency
- Service Coordination
- Strategies for objectively documenting parent–child observations

On January 12, Johanna Brutvan, Blind Low Vision (BLV) Coordinator with MDE, will be presenting to our team. She will introduce an updated vision screening checklist recommended for all Early On children. As part of every Early On multi-disciplinary evaluation, both hearing and vision screenings are required.

Whenever possible, we complete a full screening using the Welch Allyn Spot Vision Screener. When that is not feasible, we use a checklist—though the previous version had limitations and sometimes missed important vision concerns.

We're looking forward to learning more about this improved screening tool. Additional information about vision impairments and the new Early Vision Screening Checklist can be found on the MDE-LIO website.

AT/AAC

We are seeing increasing numbers of children gain access to Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices through their insurance. Early On team members are actively supporting families by helping parents use these devices at home to strengthen communication. Research and real-world experience show that even very young children can benefit from AT/AAC when it is introduced early and used consistently.

In addition, Early On team members are participating in an ISD-wide planning group focused on identifying best practices and developing consistent, comprehensive communication supports. The goal is to empower all students to find their voice and thrive.

More information about this planning group can be found in the ISD Professional Learning Brochure under Special Education: Building Communication and Literacy Supports for All.