

Executive Summary

Special Services Audit
Center Cass School District 66

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TJ Consultants
Advancing Special Education
Dr. Judy Hackett and Dr. Tim Thomas

With an ongoing commitment to supporting educational systems, TJ Consultants believes that students are the center of a system's focus and decision-making. Reviewing and guiding systemic improvement, with particular emphasis on supporting students with specialized needs, reflects Center Cass School District 66's interest in organizational growth and refinement. This well-timed, specialized audit serves as a critical initial focus for inclusion in the multi-year district strategic plan development beginning in August, 2026. As a cornerstone of our professional work in special education, systemic growth stems from a shared belief that learners with diverse needs receive compelling, equitable, and high-quality learning opportunities that promote lifelong skills. It is through that lens that this audit has been conducted and we have enjoyed learning and engaging with District 66 stakeholders through meetings, interviews, review and analysis of a plethora of data and gaining insights through various roles and perspectives. This collaborative process began over six months ago and an extensive review of special education programming, services and processes has taken place, with careful analysis of a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures. This Executive Summary highlights extraordinary strengths and areas of opportunity as the district continues its diligent efforts to advance and refine systems that affect student growth and outcomes.

The collaborative nature of this audit partnership is evident in the high level of interest and time committed by district leaders, staff and parents; synergy and enthusiasm will serve to continue a high level of engaged strategies in further growth efforts for the district. In preliminary district leadership discussions in Fall 2025, focus areas for the review and customized questions were developed to guide the depth and analysis of this comprehensive audit. Many positive aspects of the district's student services were shared, along with a strong and genuine interest in gathering further insights and recommendations to effectively advance efforts and, consequently, positively impact student outcomes and system growth. The priority areas of focus identified by district leaders and guided by customized questions include the following key areas:

- Effective continuum of programs, services and practices for diversity of needs
- Shared collective vision regarding diversity of needs and opportunities for growth
- Compliance with state and federal indicators, comparability with similar districts
- Resource allocations, systems and efficiency to address needs

The research-based audit process blends essential components of high-performing school systems with highly effective special education practices aligned to a framework for systemic change. This audit has been customized for Center Cass School District 66 and included an in-depth analysis of key priorities, addressed through a comprehensive review of customized questions aligned with the three main goal areas of the school district's strategic plan, identified below. An important part of this audit includes the respective district questions that guided each specific area of focus, a summary of qualitative evidence gathered through meetings and interviews with stakeholders and an extensive review and analysis of related quantitative data and district artifacts, relevant research, consultant input and considerations for future action planning. This summary includes strengths, areas of opportunity and recommendations related

to the identified priority areas and potential growth measures to monitor and evaluate progress that may contribute to the upcoming district strategic plan process.

Learning Outcomes and Instructional Environment

A critical part of educational systems is the rigorous learning outcomes designed to promote growth and success and the instructional environment that fosters that growth

In a progressive and inclusive district community with grade-level schools and strong parent engagement, this section serves as a foundational focus for the district's ongoing growth, health and greater focus and review than the other two.

Included in forum discussions, interviews and artifact review, Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) was a lively topic area with staff acknowledging much of the progress made and supporting guidance and data systems (Panorama, MAP, AIMSweb, DIBELS). Many staff also shared challenges, including a lack of consistency and clarity in advancing through the implementation of this complex and expansive system of support. These are very common challenges in districts, especially as systems evolve and personnel change, and they often have a greater impact in smaller systems.

Extensive review of the district guidance and descriptions around the continuum of programs and services included data review, decision-making processes and challenges reflective of the size of the district and customization of programming designed around needs. Data review indicated the district's historical trend of students identified for special education less than the state average (10.7%) and an ongoing inclusive mindset, reflected in most services provided within the general education environment for the majority of the school day (over 80%).

Essential Supports

Interest in shared collective efficacy and a shared vision articulated in the vision statements of the district and an inclusive equity statement committed to all students. There are numerous ongoing systems and structures that support collaboration, collective community engagement for staff and families and dedication to further discussions and growth in continuous planning and evidence reflected in exhibiting the core values established. This inclusive mindset sets the tone and expectations for all staff and engages all students in the learning process through an equitable sense of belonging and community. The pride and dedication of staff and leaders in the district, and the care and support for students, were reflected in all forums and discussions.

Environmental Vision and Supports

The district commitment to addressing this goal area is reflected in a very comprehensive review of staffing trends, noted staffing increase of 10-15% over past few years, a detailed data-driven process for the development of staff workload plans, carefully designed to be more reflective of the scope of time-intensive aspects of specialized roles and a trend review of resource allocations that shows a positive trend in increased support and alignment of support across the

district. The recent passage of the referendum has provided an opportunity to be responsive and proactive for systems and student support in oversight, coaching and individualizing support. Student-to-staff ratios (17:1) are in the middle of comparable PreK-8 districts, while the district's operational costs for educating students (\$15,919) are conservative and place the district in the lower tier of PreK-8 school systems in DuPage County.

District Strengths

- Dedicated, collaborative, student-centered staff and district leadership who demonstrate a positive, caring approach to guiding student growth
- Community support that resulted in a successful passage of the recent referendum that reflects a commitment to the future goals and identified needs of the district
- Extensive and collaborative efforts are evident in the review of numerous guidance and process documents that reflect adaptive and reflective leadership in developing a systemic approach and accountability measures for district priorities.
- District responsiveness to student needs is reflected in a trend of more recent years of staffing increases aligned to needs while remaining fiscally responsible.
- Strong school-family-community partnership evident, with a collaborative forum to encourage engagement and positive future planning.

District Opportunities for Growth

Advance focus on consistent processes and communication to support the diversity of student needs

- Articulate a shared and collective vision that supports provision of supports and services to effectively address the range of student needs across the district. Incorporate descriptions of specially designed instructional (SDI) needs that include flexibility and individualization across learning environments and shared support roles. Provide clear, consistent expectations for staff and administrators, supported by coaching, supervision and evaluation.
- Articulate and implement strategies of a systemic MTSS model with strong emphasis on Tier 1, tiered strategies, supports and aligned PD that reflects a shared district responsibility for all learners. Review a shared understanding and consensus of the MTSS model across age bands and what common practices will best reflect clarity and consistency.
- Provide further clarity on the data-driven decision-making processes for student services through aligned, effective resource allocations and the customization of the continuum of services and supports.
- Advance capacity-building systems across the new and emerging processes as a part of onboarding, mentoring, support and changes in systems and partnerships with other districts, organizations and state leadership.
- Advance efforts to design and provide customized professional development and generalization of training into practice through coaching and modeling supports aligned to areas of need for positions/responsibilities.