



**DATE:** 3/10/25

**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 4 unfilled paraprofessional positions, 2 of which are at our setting IV coop.
- Our Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) met on February 19 and heard a presentation on the Science of Reading by Special Education Instructional Coach Jes Carlson.
- On February 10 our Student Support Professionals (School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists) and district administrators participated in a Truancy Discussion with County and City representatives, including Mower County Correction, the Mower County Attorney, Truancy Officers, and the Chief of Police. It was a good discussion highlighting the importance of relationship building and working together to meet the needs of students and families.
- We held the inaugural meeting of the Chemical Violations Task Force, comprised of representatives from Mower County Corrections, Police Liaison Officers, and Ellis and AHS administration and social workers. This group will be looking at options to support students with chemical violations at school.
- County Collaborative/Gerard Mental Health Initiative: 30 referrals processed so far this school year. Reminder that these are currently virtual services provided at AHS and Oakland Education Center only. We have also put a contract in place with Fernbrook Family Center to provide school-based mental health services at some of our other sites. The start of this service continues to be pending their hiring of a therapist for this purpose. Gerard, however, has recently added a therapist (so we may be able to expand on those services in the near future).
- We are making a shift in our special education leadership structure for the remainder of this year and into next year in order to have one special education leader focusing on the elementaries (K-4), one at the middle level (5-8), and one at the high school. This approach will more equitably divide job responsibilities.

### **Packer Profile for all learners**

- We were proud to host a Unified Basketball Day on February 13. Students with disabilities and their typically developing peers for other local districts joined our Unified Physical Education students in Ove Berven and Packer gymnasiums for a fun filled day of inclusion and teamwork!
- Renee Labat from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) provided a presentation on suicide awareness to our Packer Profile classes a couple of weeks ago.

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

- One of our department initiatives is to serve students in more inclusive settings. When comparing our percentage in each federal setting from the December 2023 childcount to the December 2024 childcount, we have a significant increase in setting 1 and decrease in setting 2 across the board. This supports our work to provide services in the Least Restrictive Environment!
- Our District MTSS Team has been working on finalizing our MTSS handbook. This team also is reviewing the documents and meeting agendas for the building-level teams to refine our practices moving into next year.
- Our Teamworks consultant, Stephanie White, spent the day in the district on February 28. We were able to visit a couple of sites and obtained valuable feedback around scheduling and the MTSS process.

### **Excellence in Resource Management**

- We are finalizing the process of getting all of our paraprofessionals certified as "highly qualified" with the state.
- We have completed our second submission for our comprehensive fiscal desk audit.
- We were disappointed when the state applied a 95% proration to our state special education funds for this year, and are hoping for a fix during the legislative session.
- Sheri participated in MASE Day at the Capitol on February 25 to lobby for both fiscal and programmatic supports.
- We have successfully completed recertification for Children's Therapeutic Services and Supports (CTSS) for both Austin Public Schools and the Austin Albert Lea Area Special Education Cooperative for another 3 years. This allows us to continue third party billing for school-based mental health services.