



DATE: 4/14/25

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 7 unfilled paraprofessional positions, 2 of which are at our setting IV coop.
- We are making progress filling our professional positions for the 25-26 school year, with the following positions already filled with quality candidates: Executive Director of Special Services, Elementary Special Education Supervisor, Behavior Consultant, Teacher of Visual Impairments, 3 Special Education Teachers, and 1 in-person speech clinician (contracted through an agency; this will allow us to reduce the number of virtual speech therapists we currently use).
- Our Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) met on March 19 (during our Remote Learning day!) and heard an excellent presentation about transition programming, including our Austin Public Schools transition team as well as our community partners at the Minnesota Workforce Center and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED).
- Our Student Support Professionals (School Counselors, School Social Workers, School Psychologists) did not meet in March due to spring break.
- Our Chemical Health Task Force is one step closer to bringing the Teen Intervene Chemical Health awareness program to Austin High School and Ellis Middle School. We now have a legal agreement in place to have professionals from Independent Management Services (IMS) deliver the program in our buildings. Administrators and Social Workers are now working on soliciting attendees, targeting both students who have had chemical violations this school year as well as student who want to learn more. We intend to pilot one three-week session at each building yet this school year.
- County Collaborative/Gerard Mental Health Initiative: These services have now been expanded to include three sites: AHS, Oakland Education Center, and Ellis Middle School. 31 referrals have been processed so far this school year. We have still been unable to access services through Fernbrook Family Center due to their inability to hire a therapist.

Packer Profile for all learners

- Our Austin Transition Program students will be participating in a Work Skills Challenge Day in Rochester on April 10. This event provides an opportunity for students to show off their skills in various categories, including completing job applications and interviews.

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

- Austin Public Schools was highlighted in a blog for our work with virtual speech services this year. The blog can be accessed at: <https://nextlevelspeech.com/partnership-spotlight-how-austin-public-schools-are-redefining-speech-services-in-minnesota/>
- Our MTSS District Team is finalizing updated forms and data review process for our building-level Supplemental Support Teams and School Leadership Teams for next school year. Additionally, we will have some additional standard forms for buildings to access to gather additional information based on individual student needs for informing the Intensive Support Team process.

Excellence in Resource Management

- Thanks to the efforts of our Third Party Billing team, the length of our average encounters that we are billing for Personal Care Assistant services has increased by 114% at APS and 154% at AALASEC. This should result in a significant increase in our medical assistance revenue!
- We have once again been identified as disproportionately identifying students of Two or More Races in the special education category of Emotional Behavioral Disorders. This will require us to set aside 15% of our federal Special Education funds for programming to reduce this identification. We are in the process of analyzing our data and generating ideas for spending these dollars in the most impactful way.