

# Special Education Program Review: Executive Summary

Monroe Township School District

June 2016



# **Executive Summary**

Located in New Jersey, Monroe Township School District (MTSD) is a suburban community with six elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Of the District's roughly 6,628 students, approximately 17% receive special education services. The District is rapidly growing, with enrollment steadily increasing. During the 2009-10 school year, the District served 5,554 students. Projections for the 2016-17 school year forecast 6,852 students, an increase of roughly 1,300 students over a seven year period. MTSD is also a receiving district for neighboring Jamesburg School District (JSD). JSD is a K-8 district so all high school students attend Monroe Township High School. As a District, MTSD has invested in strong educational programming. MTSD offers a range of programs and services designed to prepare all students with disabilities for postgraduate success. This sometimes attracts families who move to the area specifically for its reputable special education programming.

In an effort to further understand trends and secure recommendations that would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the special education program, MTSD contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) in January 2016 to provide an in-depth analysis of the District's special education services, staffing, organizational structure, and processes. Over the course of this study, PCG conducted a review of MTSD's special education data, held focus groups with a range of stakeholders, and visited several schools. This report provides an overview of the MTSD special education program and details recommendations for programmatic improvements. This report was designed to help drive programmatic efficiency and lead to better outcomes for students and families.

The PCG team thanks the many individuals who contributed to this review of MTSD's special education services. Organizing a review of this nature and magnitude requires significant time and resources. This review would not have been possible without the contributions of Dr. Michael Kozak, Dr. Dori Alvich, Ms. Marietta Ruela, Ms. Marie Pepe, Mr. Reggie Washington, and Mr. Michael Gorski, in particular. Additionally, PCG thanks the many MTSD staff members who provided insight and input to the study. It was evident that the faculty and staff of MTSD work passionately to support children with disabilities and to help ensure the District serves these students in the best possible, and most inclusive, manner. We also thank the parents and school board members who provided thoughtful and relevant information to inform this work, as these perspectives are vital to the success of all students.

Finally, areas of concern are delivered with recommendations that are designed to improve the academic performance and social/emotional outcomes of students with disabilities, who as a group have traditionally lagged behind their very high performing peers. The purpose of this effort is to assist the District in taking a series of actions that are challenging but intended to ensure that *ALL* students cultivate their intellectual, creative, and social potential.

## **Final Report**

As part of this process, PCG reviewed an extensive amount of data and documents and had discussions with over 100 individuals through interviews and focus groups consisting of parents, district personnel, and organizations that support the District. Based on a synthesis of information from these sources, this report provides a comprehensive analysis of student outcomes disaggregated by multiple student characteristics, and includes benchmarking against comparable New Jersey school districts. In addition to identifying areas of strength and concern, the report provides action-oriented recommendations to guide future decision-making based on the evidence acquired through the review.

<sup>1</sup> Monroe Township School District, Development of a Budget Philosophy for Fiscal Year 2016-17, School Board presentation.

This final report is organized by six major themes:

- Multi-Tiered Systems of Support & Referral/Eligibility for Services
- Special Education Demographics
- Achievement of Students with IEPs
- Educational Settings for Students with IEPs
- · Teaching & Learning for Students with IEPs
- Support for Teaching & Learning

The section below summarizes the research methodology used to conduct this study.

Recommendations are summarized at the end of this report, with detailed steps for implementation. In addition, an explanation of frequently used terms is in Appendix D of the full report.

Throughout this report, references are made to students receiving special education services. They will also be referred to as students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or students with disabilities (SWDs). The terms are intended to be interchangeable. Further, the Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) Office in MTSD has oversight responsibility for special education service delivery and monitoring. References will be made to both the "Special Education Department" and the "Pupil Personnel Services" Office. Though it is understood that the PPS Office includes other district functions, such as attendance monitoring, these terms are interchangeable in the context of this report.

# Methodology

Findings and recommendations related to programs, policies and practices resulted from a comprehensive analysis of three data sources. The first component involved the analysis of student outcomes and achievement trends (Outcome Analysis). The second component focused on the systemic organizational and program factors that have an impact on program effectiveness and exceptional student outcomes (Organizational and Program Analysis). The analyses conducted for these two components drew from the third component, the Research and Practice Literature. The literature identifies the organizational factors, the program elements and practices, and the implementation conditions associated with program effectiveness and positive student outcomes.

PCG's approach was multidimensional, emphasized the participation of multiple stakeholders, and involved qualitative data collection approaches.

Components included:

- 1. An analysis of student outcomes data
- 2. Interviews and focus groups with a sample of district and school personnel
- 3. Classroom observations
- 4. A review of district documents pertinent to the focus of the study

A critical component of this study was to determine how MTSD's special education program compares to similar districts. PCG partnered with MTSD to identify comparable districts and used publically available information to analyze key MTSD special education statistics against these districts. PCG also drew upon our own knowledge of other districts' policies and procedures when making recommendations for best practice.

#### POPULATION TRENDS AND OUTCOME ANALYSES

### Student Population and Program Placement Trends

Population and program placement trends are significant equity indicators of the extent to which there is over-representation of any group in the special education population, and they also provide important information about the distribution of the special education population in placements that represent least restrictive environments. Population trends were analyzed to show, where possible, changes over time by grade level/age, disability categories, level of service, and diversity categories (gender, race/ethnicity, and language where the number of students is sufficient to allow analyses), and combinations of variables.

#### Student Achievement Trends

Student performance data were analyzed to provide a comparative examination of performance by both special and regular education students.

#### **DOCUMENT REVIEW**

PCG reviewed numerous documents and analyzed them for information related to district and school structures, programs, policies and practices. Data and documents reviewed were in the following general categories:

- Quantitative data
- Description of services and activities
- Documents regarding accountability and professional development
- · District procedures and guides
- New Jersey Department of Education Special Education reports

A full list of data and documents reviewed is provided in Appendix B of the full report.

### **INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS**

Extensive data were acquired through interviews and focus groups with central office administrators, school level administrators, special education teachers, general education teachers, special education supervisors, school principals, parents, students, school board members, Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) members, and other school-based personnel.

More specifically, central office administrators included the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, the Director of Pupil Personnel Services, the Supervisor of Special Education, the Director of Information, and the Business Administrator. Focus groups included principals, team chairpersons, special education teachers, parents, counselors, school psychologists, related service providers, curriculum supervisors, general education teachers, special program staff, and co-teaching teams.

#### STUDENT RECORD CONFIDENTIALITY

To protect personally identifiable student information and ensure privacy, PCG complied with the Institutional Review Board's procedures, the Common Rule, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the Health Insurance Portability Act, and other state, local, and federal rules for the protection of such confidentiality. PCG's Security and Confidentiality Policy for Protected Data is fully described in Appendix A of the full report.

# **Acknowledgements**

The PCG team thanks the many individuals who contributed to this review of MTSD's special education services. Their efforts were critical to our ability to obtain a broad and detailed understanding of the system so that we could present the best possible proposals for improving special education and related services for the District's students. This review would not have been possible without the contributions of Dr. Michael Kozak, Dr. Dori Alvich, Ms. Marietta Ruela, Ms. Marie Pepe, Mr. Reggie Washington, and Mr. Michael Gorski. They organized the team's interviews and provided the documents and data we needed in order to do our work.

PCG thanks the many MTSD staff members with whom we met for focus groups and interviews. Their dedication to improving services, programs, and outcomes for all students was evident in each of our sessions. We also thank the parents and school board members who gave up their time to provide us with crucial information, allowing us to obtain a complete picture of MTSD's special education and general education program. We appreciate the thoughtfulness each parent, teacher, administrator, and community member devoted to this project in an effort to ensure that all Monroe Township children have access to an education that allows them to reach their full potential.

Finally, although this report documents areas of concern, PCG acknowledges the many successes, improvements, and achievements of MTSD that are detailed throughout this report. The areas of concern are used to formulate recommendations designed to improve the academic performance and social/emotional outcomes of students with disabilities, who as a group have traditionally lagged behind some of their high performing peers. PCG's goal is to assist the District in taking a series of actions that are challenging but intended to ensure the District can abide by its commitment to prepare each student for postgraduate success after the conclusion of their MTSD educational career.

#### **MEMBERS OF THE PCG TEAM**

Appendix C of the full report presents brief biographical sketches of PCG's team members, who include:

- Dr. Jennifer Meller, PCG Senior Consultant and former Director in Specialized Services for the School District of Philadelphia
- *Will Gordillo*, PCG Senior Associate and former Executive Director responsible for exceptional education for the Palm Beach County School District
- Lauren Krempecki, PCG Data Analyst and Project Support, former special education teacher and case manager for the School District of Philadelphia.

# **Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement**

The chart below summarizes the identified areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, which are further detailed in the report.

Section	Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
I. Multi-Tiered System of Supports & Referral/ Eligibility Services	<ul> <li>All schools implement I&amp;RS and meet as school-based academic and behavior problem solving teams to address student concerns.</li> <li>The District launched an Rtl initiative several years ago for grades K-2 to strengthen interventions available for younger students struggling with reading.</li> <li>There are pockets of excellence in Rtl implementation evident in some elementary schools.</li> <li>The District has a promising foundation of intervention practices for struggling learners upon which to expand.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>I&amp;RS is viewed as a pathway to a special education evaluation, not a mechanism for student support.</li> <li>I&amp;RS is not consistently implemented and does not always sufficiently meet the needs of students.</li> <li>Elementary schools with grades K-2 use the Rtl framework and also have I&amp;RS team meetings. This set up appears to be confusing for school staff.</li> <li>Both Rtl and I&amp;RS appear to be spearheaded by the special education department.</li> <li>There is no other framework is in place to adequately address the students that are not responding to instruction and need additional intervention and support.</li> <li>The District does not have an MTSS leadership team focused on creating the vision for and coordinating academic and behavioral interventions.</li> <li>More districtwide, research-based interventions are needed for targeted student support.</li> <li>There is a perception that general education teachers do not have the adequate tools, training, or expertise to understand how to support their struggling students.</li> <li>There is no systemic approach to data collection at the District level. Criteria and reporting varies by school.</li> </ul>
II. Special Education Demographics	MTSD was found to be in compliance with both disproportionality indicators in the State Performance Plan (SPP).	<ul> <li>MTSD has a speech/language impairment rate that is higher than that of the state and the nation.</li> <li>African-American students are more likely to be identified as having an</li> </ul>

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The District's emotional disturbance disability rate is lower than the state's rate and substantially lower than the nation's rate.	intellectual disability; white students are more likely to be identified as having an emotional disturbance.
<ul> <li>MTSD exceeds state transition targets.</li> <li>In grades K-8, MTSD students with IEPs outperform their statewide peers in reading.</li> <li>In grades 3-5 and 7-8, MTSD students with IEPs outperform their statewide peers in math.</li> <li>The graduation rate for students with disabilities exceeds that of other comparable districts, the state average, and the state target.</li> <li>The dropout rate for students with disabilities is significantly less than the state average and state target.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>MTSD rates below the state target and does not meet requirements for several preschool indicators.</li> <li>There is an achievement gap between students with/without IEPs in reading and math.</li> <li>Students with IEPs scored less than their statewide peers on Algebra and Geometry.</li> </ul>
MTSD educates far fewer students with disabilities in separate settings than comparable districts.	<ul> <li>Students with IEPs spend less time in general education classes compared to several comparable districts and the state performance target.</li> <li>Students with emotional disturbance and intellectual disabilities are educated in more restrictive settings than their peers.</li> <li>Fewer Hispanic students are educated in general education settings.</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>The District has high expectations for all students.</li> <li>There are a variety of supports (e.g., small group instruction, remediation, monitoring, etc.) to help students with disabilities meet with success in the general education setting.</li> <li>There is a fluidity in how programs are designed to meet student needs.</li> <li>MTSD has a transition coordinator and a broad array of transition programs.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>The District continues to face challenges to improve outcomes and inclusive opportunities for preschool students with disabilities.</li> <li>There is variance in the understanding and usage of coteaching. Co-teaching teams often change from year to year.</li> <li>It is the perception of the general education teachers that it is sometimes difficult to get guidance from special educators about accommodations/ modifications needed for students with IEPs.</li> </ul>
	disturbance disability rate is lower than the state's rate and substantially lower than the nation's rate.  MTSD exceeds state transition targets.  In grades K-8, MTSD students with IEPs outperform their statewide peers in reading.  In grades 3-5 and 7-8, MTSD students with IEPs outperform their statewide peers in math.  The graduation rate for students with disabilities exceeds that of other comparable districts, the state average, and the state target.  The dropout rate for students with disabilities is significantly less than the state average and state target.  MTSD educates far fewer students with disabilities in separate settings than comparable districts.

#### Interventions are in place to There was confusion as to whether accelerate the learning of teachers could provide other reading struggling students and students supports and scaffolds outside of the with disabilities. regular grade level curriculum for special education students. VI. Support for There is significant The District does not have a standard Teaching & interdepartmental collaboration operating procedure manual. and executive support of special Learning education services. The District's website has minimal information about special education Special education leadership is service offerings or guidance exceptionally strong, and attuned documents. and responsive to the needs of schools and students. There is not enough time for collaboration between teachers and The administration and operation paraprofessional aides. of special education is organized. The District offers a wide array of The parent advisory council is not well professional development attended. offerings. Parent communication regarding The 1:1 iPad initiative has helped transportation concerns should be provide needed assistive improved. technology support to students Data are not consistently used across with disabilities. the District to make instructional decisions.

# **Summary of Recommendations**

The below chart highlights PCG's high-level recommendations for MTSD, organized by theme. Following each section of the full report, PCG provides detailed recommendations to address the relevant concerns. Each of these recommendations includes specific action steps. In addition, at the end of the full report, overall strengths and all of the recommendations are listed together for ease of review. The full set of recommendations is provided as an addendum to this Executive Summary.

Theme	Recommendations	
1. MTSS	<ul> <li>Build on MTSD's I&amp;RS process and curricular framework to develop/ implement a framework of multi-system of supports (MTSS) for academic achievement, positive behavior, and social/emotional growth (including enrichment) for all students.</li> </ul>	
2. EVALUATION PROCESS	<ul> <li>Target activities to assess practices for students with disabilities in high- risk areas to inform future practices; and to support appropriate special education evaluation referrals for students in areas of possible under- identification.</li> </ul>	
3. DATA COLLECTION AND USE	<ul> <li>Design a system of data collection and analysis that will enable the superintendent, administrators, principals, and teachers to review student growth, identify patterns, solve problems, and make informed decisions.</li> </ul>	
4. PRESCHOOL SWDs	<ul> <li>Focus efforts to expand the capacity of the preschool programs for SWDs on providing more inclusive placements, including providing services and supports to children in community-based early care/child care programs.</li> </ul>	
5. SUPPORTS AND SERVICES TO INCREASE INSTRUCTION AND INCLUSION IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM	<ul> <li>Provide more students with IEPs supports and services in general education classrooms to support their access to rigorous Common Core curriculum. The vast majority of MTSD students with IEPs are qualified under a disability category that in no way precludes them from—with appropriate services and supports—functioning at or above grade level or from achieving proficiency on a state's academic content standards in reading and math.</li> </ul>	
6. VERTICAL TRANSITIONS	<ul> <li>Develop a district-wide plan with input from key stakeholders to create consistent practices that support successful vertical transitions for students with IEPs.</li> <li>Seek additional ways to insure that students' transitions between each school year and teachers are facilitated to support appropriate and successful classroom learning experiences.</li> </ul>	
7. INCLUSION MODEL	<ul> <li>Strengthen the inclusion model of co-teaching to support student access to rigorous Common Core standards.</li> <li>Create written guidelines that provide clear expectations and directions to all and provide an institutionalized record to which all staff, including new teachers, can refer.</li> <li>Provide consistent, on-going professional development.</li> <li>Develop supportive structures that allow effective co-teaching teams to create efficiency and partnership build investment.</li> <li>Ensure consistent common co-teacher planning time.</li> </ul>	

8. TRANSITION PROGRAM	Develop a team of stakeholders to expand the transition program for
	<ul> <li>students with IEPs.</li> <li>Gather stakeholders with high expertise in the area of post-high school transition activities and review the District's current program and how it may be improved and expanded.</li> </ul>
9. OUT OF DISTRICT PLACEMENT	<ul> <li>Develop strategies for reviewing the progress, services and supports needed for returning the students in out of district placements to the home district, if and when that becomes appropriate, in accordance with the decisions made by the IEP team. Once a student is stepped down and returned to the District, determine what transition skills will be provided in the home community as the student progresses and eventually graduates. MTSD should continue its efforts to systematically review and return students when appropriate to the least restrictive educational setting in accordance with the LRE Settlement with NJDOE agreement.</li> </ul>
10. ORGANIZATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION	<ul> <li>Maximize special education support to schools in accordance with the NJ Code by increasing communication to include an unrelenting focus on instruction, attaining positive LRE findings and managing change.</li> </ul>
11. PERSONNEL RATIOS/ CASELOADS & SUPPORT	<ul> <li>Continue to examine staffing with respect to caseload/workload issues and fund additional positions or maximize the use of existing positions by redistributing caseloads and workloads to improve efficiency. Part of this examination should include analysis of student numbers, frequency of service, number of schools served, and the intensity of services needed by each student (e.g., Special Educator &amp; Paraprofessional Aides/Assistant Ratios and Basis for all allocation calculations).</li> </ul>
12. PARAPROFESSIONAL AIDES	<ul> <li>Establish, implement, and monitor expectations regarding the use of paraprofessional aides and the training they need to carry out their assigned duties as intended (e.g., Oversight and Management, Schedules, Knowledgeable Representative, and Fading).</li> </ul>
13. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	<ul> <li>Based on all of the areas in these recommendations that require professional learning for effective implementation, plan a differentiated professional learning program for all affected educators, paraprofessionals, assistants, etc. Infuse learning opportunities that are ongoing and job-embedded, including new teacher induction and leadership development.</li> </ul>
14. TRANSPORTATION	<ul> <li>Review the current process for processing transportation complaints.</li> <li>Appoint a transportation liaison from the PPS office and monitor timely responses to parents.</li> </ul>
15. PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT	<ul> <li>Enhance communication with parents/families by improving the MTSD/Special Education websites and resolving disputes. Use MTSD's website as a mechanism for keeping stakeholders aware of MTSD's activities relevant to the PCG recommendations and implementation status, as well as other enhancements and changes for special education.</li> </ul>
16. SPECIAL EDUCATION MANUAL	<ul> <li>Create an MTSD special education manual to support current and user- friendly access to procedures/practices relevant to the management/operation of special education.</li> </ul>

# • Establish a system of accountability to support MTSD's mission to provide each and every student with an exemplary college preparatory education so they can succeed in college, career, and life; and goals for each and every students to reach/exceed academic proficiency, and to eliminate the achievement gap.

# **Detailed Summary of Recommendations**

The following provides overall recommendations for the MTSD that would enhance the instruction, intervention and support for students with IEPs, as well as other students in need of additional support to improve their academic achievement, social/emotional development and/or positive behavior.

- 1. MTSS. Build on MTSD's I&RS process and curricular framework to develop/implement a framework of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for academic achievement, positive behavior, and social/emotional growth (including enrichment) for all students.<sup>2</sup>
  - a. Framework. Establish a framework for the implementation of MTSS, including a written description and guidelines, for students in grades kindergarten through 12 performing below grade level standards.<sup>3</sup>
    - i. Leadership. Under the direction of the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, engage the District's leadership team, including school principals, the Director of Special Education, etc., and representatives from every educational unit (e.g., Title I, bilingual, gifted, etc.).
    - **ii. Standards.** Confirm or establish standards for core curriculum and differentiated and scaffolded instruction, universal screening, tiers of increasingly intensive evidence-based interventions, progress monitoring/use of data to make educational decisions, and the engagement of families. If necessary, phase in standards and expectations.
    - **iii. Messaging and Documentation.** Develop internal and external materials that explain the connection between MTSS and I&RS and the research base for following a structure intervention process. Create a user-friendly and accessible MTSS manual for school teams and for parents to understand the MTSS process and to document procedures/practices relevant to the management/operation of MTSS in MTSD.
    - iv. Instructional Leadership Teams. Establish standards for district-wide and school-based instructional leadership teams regarding the use of problem-solving and data-based decision making at all tiers to match instructional (academic and behavior) resources to need for supporting academic advancement and positive behavior; and supplement teams as needed to support teachers.
  - b. Professional Learning. Provide a high-quality and ongoing professional learning curriculum that will enable principals/all relevant school personnel to implement the above activities (and other recommendations in this report). Identify the core information that various staff members need to implement the framework and differentiate professional learning, and provide a certificate of demonstrated performance.
  - c. Cross-Function Training. Initiate cross-function training of administrators and other school support groups from every educational division, including the Business Office, to expand their knowledge and ability to support school-based personnel. Consider mandating training and other approaches to ensure that staff members needing professional development receive it, and providing a certificate of demonstrated performance.
  - d. Content. Include information related to language development, English language acquisition, consistent progress monitoring, analysis and use of data for decision-making, implementation of scientific research-based interventions at varying level of intensity, etc.

<sup>2</sup> This information includes components that are based on the <u>Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation Act</u> (LEARN Act), H.R. 2272, which if passed would authorize state grants to improve birth through grade 12 literacy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Response to Intervention/Multi-tiered Systems of Support (RTI/MTSS) Guide developed by the RTI Committee of the Inclusion Action Group Project led by the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education (NJCIE)( <a href="https://njcie.org/wp-content/uploads/Part-1-NJ-RTI-MTSS-Guide-Introduction.pdf">https://njcie.org/wp-content/uploads/Part-1-NJ-RTI-MTSS-Guide-Introduction.pdf</a>).

- **e.** *Parent Involvement.* With parent stakeholder groups, consider how training will be made available for families/caregivers to reinforce activities that will support the learning of their children.
- f. Implementation. Based on these standards, develop an expedited two-to-three-year district-wide implementation plan that encompasses the current Rtl framework in elementary schools. As part of this planning process, consider how each school will have access to sufficient evidence-based interventions to meet the needs of most students and access to additional interventions for students with additional needs. As part of this process, consider the fiscal implications of enabling schools to retain special education staff to provide interventions for all students if the need for these teachers is reduced because of lower incidence rates for students with IEPs. Identify staff members who have relevant knowledge/expertise and who could provide training to their peers.
- **g.** *Intervention Models*. Identify models for intervention, including those for English language learners and gifted students. Consider: how students with IEPs may access appropriate interventions with their nondisabled peers for IEP goal areas, with supplemental consultation/collaboration provided by a special educator.
  - i. Communication & Feedback. Establish a timely communication/feedback process to share solutions to implementation barriers. Several problem areas are likely to require a targeted group of knowledgeable people to resolve issues as they arise. For example, schools often have difficulty providing services with existing staff and would benefit from feedback from individuals able to analyze the situation, give meaningful suggestions, and recommend different staffing arrangements.
  - ii. School-based Planning. Use a school-based process for planning the framework's implementation. Provide a template that includes the core components necessary to support successful inclusive practices: school-based planning, professional development, data gathering/review, and support for plan implementation. Integrate the plan with school improvement plans.
- h. Use for Referral/Qualification for Specially Designed Instruction. Establish standards for the use of MTSS for: referring students for special education evaluations; and using results as part of the process for determining the existence of a specific learning disability, and any other disability areas as permitted by state law/regulations. As part of this consideration, consider research showing the use of MTSS to reduce racial/ethnic disproportionality in the identification of students with disabilities and suspensions.
- i. Accountability. Include in the District's system of accountability measurable expectations for implementing the core curriculum and MTSS framework. Establish, communicate, support, and monitor clear expectations and "non-negotiables," establishing clear lines of accountability and responsibility across departments and schools, aligning them with relevant standards and guidance. Incorporate the expectations into administrator, principal, teacher, paraprofessional aides, and related-service personnel evaluations. Have schools incorporate activities into their school improvement plans that would enable them to meet these expectations.
- j. Financial Models. Provide examples of how schools can use funds to support MTSS implementation. Consider the flexible use of allowable funds under Title I, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) funds under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may be used to support MTSS.<sup>4</sup> Provide other funding models for school consideration.
- EVALUATION PROCESS. Target activities to assess practices for students with disabilities in high-risk
  areas to inform future practices; and to support appropriate special education evaluation referrals for
  students in areas of possible under-identification.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Implementing RTI Using Title I, Title III, and CEIS Funds; Implementing RTI Using Title I, Title III and CEIS Funds: Key Issues for Decision-makers at <a href="https://www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/rti.html">www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/rti.html</a>.

- a. In General. Develop a process to review recent eligibility documentation for students with disabilities. Use a facilitator for school-based personnel to review together random files for students with similar characteristics to identify any patterns and trends, including the extent to which students had received documented progress monitored research-based general education interventions, and their achievement growth after receiving an IEP. As part of the review, determine if local operational criteria would be useful to better inform the eligibility determination process.
- b. Disproportionality. Monitor the identification of students in a racial/ethnic subgroup to ensure that it is not at least two times more likely than peers to be identified as having a disability area, (i.e., risk ratios). Benchmark initial referrals and eligibility determinations by race/ethnicity in the areas of concern. Twice yearly, track whether the use of MTSS is reducing racial/ethnic disparities in initial referrals and eligibility determinations in these areas. For students who appear to be underrepresented in a disability, provide teachers with information regarding their characteristics to support the appropriate referral of students with these characteristics for an evaluation of their eligibility and any need for special education services.
- c. Track Data. Monitor the results of MTSD activities to determine if they are having any impact on the identification of students in areas of concern, and to take follow-up action as appropriate. Use district-wide and school-based Instructional Leadership Teams for this purpose. Also, review data for initial evaluations monthly to ensure mandated timelines are being met. Ensure data reported to NJOSEP regarding the timeline for initial evaluations is accurate.
- DATA COLLECTION AND USE. Design a system of data collection and analysis that will enable the superintendent, administrators, principals and teachers to review student growth, identify patterns, solve problems and make informed decisions.
  - a. Review Data. Review current data, collection issues, and reports with the districtwide MTSS leadership team and revise them to address both achievement and behavior for all subgroup student populations.
  - **b.** *Reports.* Produce user-friendly summary reports showing academic and behavioral interventions and outcomes sorted by student subgroups and by school, grade, etc.
  - c. Other Relevant Data. Plan follow-up activities on data not easily collected and reports not easily produced.
- 4. PRESCHOOL SWDS AGES 3 THROUGH 5. Focus efforts to expand the capacity of the Preschool programs for SWDs on providing more inclusive placements, including providing services and supports to children in community-based early care/child care programs.
- 5. SUPPORTS AND SERVICES TO INCREASE INSTRUCTION AND INCLUSION IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM. Provide more students with IEPs supports and services in general education classrooms to support their access to rigorous Common Core curriculum. The vast majority of MTSD students with IEPs are qualified under a disability category that in no way precludes them from—with appropriate services and supports—functioning at or above grade level or from achieving proficiency on a state's academic content standards in reading and math. The federal National Longitudinal Transition Study found that students with IEPs educated in the general setting scored closer to grade level on standardized math/language assessments than did students who spend more time in separate settings. As part of this process:
  - a. Build a System-wide Culture of Academic Optimism. The one goal that virtually everyone shares for schools is the academic achievement of students, including those with IEPs. Consider the research base of academic optimism that demonstrates how some neighborhood schools are high-performing, while others are not, and build upon MTSD's foundation already in place.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Academic Optimism of Schools (http://www.waynekhoy.com/collective-ao.html).

- b. Implement Frameworks for Inclusive Practices Training and Coaching. MTSD should consider or expand upon the following four school wide evidenced-based practices that when implemented by both general and special education teachers will begin to establish the foundational pillars throughout the school's instructional day that will provide the access and supports necessary for students with disabilities to be successful:
  - i. Universal Design for Learning. When students with IEPs are placed in general education settings as their least restrictive environment, teachers expect to accommodate for individual student needs. However, this can often feel like another responsibility that makes teaching more challenging when combined with meeting the needs of several students with IEPs and the collective needs of the range of learners needs present in their classrooms. When instruction is designed up front using UDL principles, individual learning needs are often mitigated and this can help teachers be more open to and positive about the possibility that they can support a wide array of learners, including students with IEPs.
  - ii. **Positive Behavior Intervention Supports.**<sup>6</sup> In its conceptual core, PBIS is a framework that guides in the establishment of organizational supports or systems that give school personnel capacity to use effective interventions accurately and successfully at the school, district, and state levels. These supports include:
    - team-based leadership,
    - data-based decision-making,
    - · continuous monitoring of student behavior,
    - · regular universal screening, and
    - effective on-going professional development.

Positive school culture requires effective academic and behavioral support. Core instruction or intervention as well as behavioral intervention must be implemented with fidelity, or delivered as planned, in order to be effective. Data provides information to select appropriate supports for individuals or groups and in determining a student's response to those supports. When students are succeeding in school, socially and academically, school climate improves.

iii. **Social Emotional Learning.** Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student and citizen. Extensive research, including a meta-analysis of 213 studies, has shown that programs designed to promote social and emotional competence in students produce important outcomes including improvements in standardized academic test scores that are, on average, 11 percentile points higher for students who received SEL programming compared to students who did not receive SEL (Durlak et al., 2011). In addition, high-quality instruction in SEL has been associated with reduced problem behaviors including conduct problems, drug use, and violence (e.g., Botvin et al., 1995; Farrell & Meyer, 2001). The cost-effectiveness of these approaches has also been established in a recent report finding that programs

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (http://www.pbis.org/default.aspx).

National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) (<a href="http://www.intensiveintervention.org/">http://www.intensiveintervention.org/</a>). IRIS Center (<a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/</a>).

designed to promote social and emotional competence produce, on average, a benefit to cost ratio of 11:1 (Belfield et al., 2015).<sup>7</sup>

According to the research brief from the College & Career Readiness & Success Center of the American Institute for Research SEL fits into each of the three College and Career Readiness strands focused on (1) goals and expectations for college and career readiness, (2) pathways and supports for college and career preparation, and (3) outcomes and measures for college and career success.<sup>8</sup>

In order to introduce and successfully implement these practices, it is recommended that MTSD start introducing one framework at a time in order to build skills, confidence and fidelity of implementation. A planning team will need to follow the process of implementation delineated for each of the practices and carefully consider how each of these overlap and connect to other district priorities so it is successfully assimilated and not viewed as yet another district initiative that may lead to initiative fatigue. Of the three aforementioned practices, Universal Design for Learning, would be a practical first framework to consider to implement and then scale-up to other practices.

- 6. VERTICAL TRANSITIONS. Develop a district-wide plan with input from key stakeholders to create consistent practices that support successful vertical transitions for students with IEPs. Seek ways to insure that students' transitions between each school year and teachers are facilitated to support appropriate and successful classroom learning experiences.
  - a. Develop a district-wide process for transition planning and implementation will pave the way for better outcomes. The plan should address the transition process, timelines, and schedules for successful implementation, participants and their roles, and internal and parent communication. Consideration should be given to how teams can be supported with time or other resources to meet the charge of creating a successful vertical transition program that supports classroom instruction.
  - b. Review and revise as necessary any written standards regarding the transitioning of students from one grade level to another, including the manner in which IEPs are to be developed collaboratively by staff from the two schools. Communicate the standards and have coordinators monitor their effectiveness and usage.
  - c. Create formal (such as dedicated meeting time) and informal (such as discussions via Google Hangout) mechanisms for staff to have vertical articulate discussions and to collaborate about students' needs as they transition between grades and/or schools.
  - d. Hold formal articulation meetings twice per year, in January and in late May. The January meetings should include a preliminary list of students expected to transition. The May meetings should include a more definitive list of students. School principals and scheduling staff should participate, to the extent possible, in the May meetings so that they can begin to build schedules for the following year based on this information.
- 7. INCLUSION MODEL. Strengthen the inclusion model of co-teaching to support student access to rigorous Common Core standards. Without appropriate training, resources, and administrative supports, the quality of and effectiveness co-teaching classroom practices are unrealized. <sup>9</sup> This point can be stated in other terms: When a district sees the benefits and invests its financial resources to place two highly skilled teachers with a distinct set of skills in the same classroom to address the needs of all students and the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> What Does Evidence-Based Instruction in Social and Emotional Learning Actually Look Like in Practice? A Brief on Findings from CASEL's Program Reviews by Linda Dusenbury, Sophia Calin, Celene Domitrovich, and Roger P. Weissberg, A Publication of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, October 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Source: Improving College and Career Readiness by incorporating SEL (http://www.ccrscenter.org/sites/default/files/1528%20CCRS%20Brief%20d9\_lvr.pdf).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: A Metasynthesis of Qualitative Research (<a href="http://education.ufl.edu/325t/files/2013/06/Scrugg\_2007.pdf">http://education.ufl.edu/325t/files/2013/06/Scrugg\_2007.pdf</a>).

teachers are not prepared or supported to do so, nothing will change for students. Without support, teachers typically fall into the roles of "teacher" (general educator) and "aide" (special educator). To overcome this and other potential pitfalls, we offer recommendations that lead to successful implementation.

- a. Develop written guidelines. Create written guidelines that provide clear expectations and directions to all and provide an institutionalized record to which all staff, including new teachers, can refer.
- b. Provide consistent, on-going professional development. Professional development serves as the basis for creating common understanding and shared experiences among all staff and provides a foundation upon which other systems change supports can be anchored. Develop a professional development plan specific to co-teaching and ensure it is embedded in the larger district-wide training plan. Create multiple avenues for this training, including more traditional workshops and also job embedded coaching (i.e., observing and providing feedback to peers as they are conducting co-teaching lessons). Coaching practices and feedback refines practices and guides educators to a deeper understanding.
- c. Develop supportive structures that allow effective co-teaching teams to create efficiency and partnership build investment. When co-teaching teams have spent time to develop effective communication, have established a cohesive working partnership, and are seeing positive results in student achievement, administrators must seriously consider the investment in time and effort that it takes to create an effective partnership and seek ways to maintain these teams. Develop a plan to enable successful co-teaching teams, whenever possible, to remain together from year to year. Conduct a review of co-teaching teams annually to ascertain the success of the partnership and make changes to staffing pairs when needed.
- d. Common co-teacher planning time. Experts in co-teaching suggest that to be effective, teams should invest regularly scheduled time to co-planning, whether within a provided planning block or on their own.<sup>10</sup> Equally important as the actual time spent co-planning is teachers' preparation to plan, how they use their time, and how they use unstructured planning methods to augment their formal planning time. Provide guidance on when, where, and a minimum time of often co-teaching teams should collaborate.
- **8. TRANSITION PROGRAM.** Develop a team of stakeholders to expand the transition program for students with IEPs. With the very low national employment rate<sup>11</sup> for individuals with disabilities, the provision of highly effective transition support is critical. Gather stakeholders with high expertise in the area of post-high school transition activities and review the District's current program and how it may be improved and expanded.<sup>12</sup>
- 9. OUT OF DISTRICT PLACEMENTS. Develop strategies for reviewing the progress, services and supports needed for returning the students in out of district placements to the home district, if and when that becomes appropriate, in accordance with the decisions made by the IEP team. Once a student is stepped down and returned to the District, determine what transition skills will be provided in the home community as the student progresses and eventually graduates. MTSD should continue its efforts to systematically review and return students when appropriate to the least restrictive educational setting in accordance with the LRE Settlement with NJDOE agreement.<sup>13</sup>
- **10. ORGANIZATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION.** Maximize special education support to schools by increasing communication in ways that include but is not limited to the following:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Friend, M. (2008). Co-Teaching: A Simple Solution that Isn't Simple After All. Journal of Curriculum & Instruction, Volume 2, Number 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> United States Department of Labor, May 2012: 69.5 percent for individuals with disabilities compared to 20.7 for those without disabilities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> For more information see: Evidence-Based Practices and Predictors in Secondary Transition: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know, National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (<a href="https://www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/.../ExecsummaryPPs.pdf">www.nsttac.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/.../ExecsummaryPPs.pdf</a>).

http://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/idea/Ire/lawsuit/SettlementAgreement.pdf.

- a. Unrelenting focus on instruction. Clearly communicate to schools and the broader community that a key tenet of the Special Education Department moving forward is to ensure that students with disabilities make progress, to the extent possible, in the general education curriculum and receive appropriate differentiation in all classes.
- **b.** *Positive LRE findings.* Review the extent to which students of varying disabilities can be moved to less restrictive settings and continue monitoring the appropriate placement for them.
- **c.** Change Management. Expect that all significant changes that impact a class, school, or groups of schools are communicated broadly and, to the extent possible, consider feedback by relevant stakeholder representatives, including parents.
- 11. PERSONNEL RATIOS/CASELOADS & SUPPORT. Continue to examine staffing with respect to caseload/workload issues and fund additional positions or maximize the use of existing positions by redistributing caseloads and workloads to improve efficiency. Part of this examination should include analysis of student numbers, frequency of service, number of schools served, and the intensity of services needed by each student.
  - a. Overall Special Educator & Paraprofessional Aides/Assistant Ratios. Data showing the very small per student ratio for paraprofessional aide/assistant and the larger ratio for special educators. Consider how these ratios could change to smaller special educator to student and larger paraprofessional aide/assistant to student ratios in a cost neutral way. In this way, more educators would be available to provide instruction to students with IEPs, and address teacher retention and many of the recommendations in this report. As part of this process, communicate with parents and schools regarding any ratio changes and the advantages associated with more reliance on special educators than assistants.
  - b. Basis of Calculation. Base planning for the next school year's special education staffing ratios on the most current and reliable information available for each school. Take into account the Educational Settings & Services for each student, including the number of students with IEPs most likely to be receiving instruction in general education classes and in each special program, including unusual intensity of services and other specified factors, and any students in out of district programs that are expected to transition back to the District. Include special education allocations in school's budget to facilitate planning and transparency about resources committed to each school.
- **12.** *PARAPROFESSIONAL AIDES.* Establish, implement, and monitor expectations regarding the use of paraprofessional aides and the training they need to carry out their assigned duties as intended.
  - a. Oversight and Management. Set quarterly meetings between the Business Office and the Special Education Department to review the status of paraprofessional aides and potential staffing needs. Develop clear, written protocols that outline the process for schools to request an additional aide. Ensure that the process and required documentation is clearly described and:
    - **i. Schedules.** Takes into account the student's schedule and when assistance is required during the day to coordinate, as appropriate, with assistance for other students.
    - **ii. Knowledgeable Representative.** Includes a Special Education Departmental representative with relevant knowledge/ skills to observe the student during the circumstances requiring assistance, and discuss with school staff existing school resources and any reconfiguration of them to meet the student's need.
    - **iii. Fading.** Shows how the student will be supported to become less reliant on adult assistance and more independent with self-advocacy and other skills. For more information, see Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools.<sup>14</sup>
  - b. Continuity of Staffing. Have relevant MTSD administrators (including human resources) consider how to ensure that student needs continue to be met when substitutes are absent; and how to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/evolve/JSEL0417%282%2982-90.pdf.

- ensure that paraprofessionals being considered for a position have a full and realistic understanding of their proposed role and responsibilities.
- c. Training. Include paraprofessional aides in training sessions with special education teachers and develop a training plan specifically for paraprofessional aides that supplements those offered by the staffing organization.
- **d.** *Collaboration.* With relevant MTSD administrators, including human resources, problem-solve how to provide structured collaboration time between special educators and paraprofessional aides (as well as between special and general educators).
- **13. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING.** Based on all of the areas in these recommendations that require professional learning for effective implementation, plan a differentiated professional learning program for all affected educators, paraprofessionals, assistants, etc. Infuse learning opportunities that are ongoing and job-embedded, including new teacher induction and leadership development. As part of this planning process, consider the following provisions.
  - National Standards. Have the professional learning activities be consistent with national Learning First standards. 15
  - b. Toolkits. Through a web-based instructional toolkit, include: all aspects of MTSS, including models/examples for the master schedules to support implementation; inclusive education, and evidence-based specially designed instruction; collaboration and co-planning; progress monitoring; research showing the benefits of inclusive instruction; etc. Include in the toolkits videos, webinars, and facilitate WebEx meetings to maximize communication and collaboration.
  - c. Cross-Functional Training. Initiate cross-function training of administrators and other school support groups from every educational division to expand their knowledge and ability to support school-based personnel.
  - d. Paraprofessionals/Assistants. Provide professional learning opportunities for paraprofessionals/ assistants in a differentiated and targeted manner for the personnel and students for whom they are responsible, and determine how the training will be offered to enable the paraprofessionals/ assistants to attend. For further information, see for example, Paraprofessionals: The "Sous-Chefs of Literacy Instruction."
  - **e.** *Interschool Collaboration*. Establish ways for school personnel to share across schools their successful practices and to problem-solve solutions, including the identification of demonstration schools of excellence, use of exemplary school-based personnel to include as trainers, informal common time for guided discussion, communicating use of Wiki, Google, etc.
  - f. Parent Involvement. With parent stakeholder and representative groups, consider how training will be made available for families/caregivers to reinforce activities that will support the learning, social/emotional skills, and positive behavior of their children.
  - g. Communication & Feedback. Establish timely communication/feedback processes to share solutions to implementation barriers. Several problem areas are likely to require targeted groups of knowledgeable people to resolve issues as they arise. For example, schools often have difficulty providing services with existing staff and would benefit from feedback from individuals able to analyze the situation, and give meaningful suggestions for instruction and use of staff.
- **14. TRANSPORTATION.** Review the current process for processing transportation complaints. Appoint a transportation liaison from the PPS office and monitor timely responses to parents.
- 15. PARENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT. Enhance communication with parents/families by improving the MTSD/Special Education websites and resolving disputes. Use MTSD's website as a mechanism for keeping stakeholders aware of MTSD's activities relevant to the PCG recommendations and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> National Staff Development Council, *Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals*, Dennis Sparks at www.learningforward.org/news/sparksbook/sparksbook.pdf. The document at pages 1-2 to 1-4 links a variety of national research-based reports summarizing the importance of professional development for teachers and parents.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/archives/mgiangre/TEC0740%281%2956-62.pdf.

implementation status, as well as other enhancements and changes for special education.

- **16. SPECIAL EDUCATION MANUAL.** Create a MTSD's special education manual to support current and user-friendly access to procedures/practices relevant to the management/operation of special education.
  - a. Public Access. Provide public access to the manual by posting the document on the MTSD special education webpage, and provide links to available on-line resources. Ensure staff is available to update the manual regularly with current information and resources.
  - b. Content. Include criteria, procedures and practices for each area relevant to the implementation of these recommendations, e.g., criteria for child find; referring students for a special education evaluation; inclusive instruction for preschool children; use of MTSS and state/local criteria for determining eligibility for SDI and advantages of early identification and support; support for ongoing needs of preschool children and school-aged students who are referred but are not evaluated or not qualified for services; expectations and tools to facilitate communication to teachers regarding the IEP-specified needs of students in each of their classes; participation of general education teachers in IEP meetings; role of various IEP participants and general/special education personnel in various circumstances, etc.
  - c. Collaboration with Stakeholders. Collaborate with preschool personnel, principals, other school-based groups, and PAC representatives to consider information and resource links that would be useful for each relevant group to include in the manual.
  - d. Parents/Families. In collaboration with local parent and advocacy groups, plan face-to-face training and on-line modules to provide parents an understanding of the information in the manual. If feasible, publish a modified document appropriate for parents and supplement it with one-page brochures to further access to this information. Ensure training is accessible to parents with diverse linguistic needs and sensory limitations.
- 17. RESULTS DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY. Establish a system of accountability to support MTSD's mission to provide each and every student with an exemplary college preparatory education so they can succeed in college, career, and life; and goals for each and every student to reach/exceed academic proficiency, and to eliminate the achievement gap.
  - a. Tracking Achievement/Growth for Students with IEPs. Regardless of whether NJOSEP specifically tracks in its students with IEPs as a separate subgroup for achievement/progress toward proficiency, separately track this subgroup in MTSD's system of accountability, including, e.g., Annual District Scorecard and school-level scorecards. This action would be consistent with the federal Office for Special Education Programs intent to make test scores, graduation rates, and post-school outcomes the basis of "Results-Driven Accountability," and reinforce MTSD's high expectations for each and every student.
  - b. Data Use. Address ways in which the various data components included in these recommendations and the state performance indicators for special education will be collected and assessed as part of MTSD's system of accountability. Build reports in NJ SMART that can be easily accessed by school and central office leadership. Create reports that track student progress for all staff regarding the status of their SGOs.
  - c. Professional Learning. Ensure that principals and other personnel have the information they need to successfully participate in results-driven accountability. For every recommendation that MTSD plans to implement, which requires the development/revision of expectations, procedures, instruction, etc., ensure that sufficient differentiated professional learning is designed and provided consistent with national standards.



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