
2015-2016 Special Education Department Restructure Proposal

Current best practices in education center upon the development of “whole school” approaches which create a single, unified and efficient service delivery model for all students, disabled and non-disabled, living in a community. This is predicated on the belief that students are more alike than different and that integrating programs and resources result in improved student outcomes for all. This belief is consistent with the reauthorization of IDEA, which emphasizes that students with disabilities should be held to similar standards as, and be educated with, their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

Research Recommendations

- There is a strong research base to support the education of children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. Although separate classes, with lower student to teacher ratios, controlled environments, and specially trained staff would seem to offer benefits to a child with a disability, research fails to demonstrate the effectiveness of such programs (Lipsky, 1997; Sailor, 2003).
- There is mounting evidence that, other than a smaller class size, "there is little that is special about the special education system," and that the negative effects of separating children with disabilities from their peers far outweigh any benefit to smaller classes (Audette & Algozzine, 1997).
- Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show academic gains in a number of areas, including improved performance on standardized tests, mastery of IEP goals, grades, on-task behavior and motivation to learn (National Center for Education Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995).
- Moreover, placement in inclusive classrooms does not interfere with the academic performance of students without disabilities with respect to the amount of allocated time and engaged instructional time, the rate of interruption to planned activities and students' achievement on test scores and report card grades (York, Vandercook, MacDonald, Heise-Neff, and Caughey, 1992).

Keeping these best practices in mind, it is important to note that the School District of Fort Atkinson's Strategic Plan calls for improvement in the areas of Effective Instructional Practice, Equity, and Structure/Delivery Models.

Effective Instructional Practice

Overall Goal: Increase our utilization of research-based and other effective instructional, assessment and reporting practices to increase student learning.

Equity

Overall Goal: Strengthen our commitment to ensuring an equitable and respectful educational experience embracing the participation of every student, family and staff member. In accordance with our District's mission statement, further establish high academic standards and outcomes as a goal for all students.

Structures and Delivery Models

Overall Goal: Research alternative structures and instructional delivery models that could increase student learning.

As we continue to move towards the realization of our Strategic Plan goals, it is important to take an inventory of current programming and practices in Special Education K-12. From a “birds eye” view of the district, there are inconsistent practices specific to special education delivery models. Largely, the programming approach used is building-based with varying levels of “push in” or integrated programming occurring. Within some buildings, there is large amounts of “push in” special education instruction occurring. In others, “pull out” or self-contained special education programming is more prevalent. Unfortunately, from a District perspective, similar students with similar needs are being serviced very differently across the District.

Educational Environment reflects the extent to which students with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers. In general, this is the monitoring of FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education) to assure students are receiving programming within the least restrictive environment.

The State of Wisconsin recommends that, with a typical distribution of disability prevalence, 65% or more of the students with disabilities should be served inside of the regular education environment 80% or more of the day. Less than 10% (9.4%), should be in the regular education classroom less than 40% of the day. Illustrated below, one will see that at the secondary level, we do not meet the State’s recommendation.

Building Level Average 2014-2015	% of students with disabilities served inside the regular class 80% or more of the day.	% of students with disabilities served inside the regular class less than 40% of the day.
Elementary	71%	6%
Middle School	48%	12%
High School	61%	16%
State Recommendations	65% or higher	9.4% or less

Decisions regarding inclusion and programming are made for a variety of reasons. For some, it is a belief that sheltered instruction is in the best interest of the student, with good intentions. In other cases, integrated instruction is preferable; however, self-contained programming becomes necessary due to the constraints of larger caseload sizes, significant behavioral concerns, and IEP minute requirements. Others would prefer an integrated model, but feel challenged by the amount of collaboration required by this type of programming between the special education teacher and the classroom teacher. While there are many good things happening within these self-contained classrooms, students served in a “pull-out” model do not have access to the same level of rigor and quality of programming that occurs in regular education classrooms. Research supports that same-age peer interaction is essential to achieving maximum growth and ensuring that the gap between students with disabilities and their regular education peers closes or, minimally, maintains rather than growing due to insufficient exposure to instructional rigor.

Fort Atkinson students with special education needs score higher than State averages in both reading and math when compared to their special education peers. However, significant gaps remain locally, and the State now monitors whether or not these gaps are closing through the State Report Card. Currently, the

Fort Atkinson Middle School had the lowest score in this area and trailed the State average receiving 62.3 points out of 100 in the Closing the Gaps section as compared to the State at 66.5 points. Heading into the new testing as well as the addition of testing at the 9th and 11th grades, secondary achievement for special education students will be key to strong Fort Atkinson School Report cards reflecting strong achievement and growth for these populations.

Keeping all of this information in mind, the School District of Fort Atkinson needs to establish consistent and research-based K-12 service delivery programming that will facilitate higher academic achievement for students with special needs.

Administrative Recommendation

Administration recommends that Fort Atkinson students with disabilities should be held to similar standards as, and be educated with, their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. This belief is best supported through a consistent and integrated instructional programming model. While this type of programming is present in the District inconsistently, establishment of a K-12 model is essential at this time to achieve the District's strategic plan goals and ultimately, the District's mission.

Establishment of this model requires three components:

1. Strong Response to Intervention (RtI) Model
2. Professional Development
3. Adequate Special Education Staffing

Strong RtI Model: Fort Atkinson's RtI model is early emergent. Early and diverse intervention options are key to assisting struggling learners, both regular and special education, in keeping up with the State's academic benchmarks and accessing the District's core curricular programming. Access to these interventions in a RtI system includes special education students. Specialists, such as Reading, Math, and Behavior Interventionists assist in achieving successful integrated instruction for all students. This is an important component that needs to be acknowledged when establishing an integrated special education model.

A fully implemented RtI model also includes differentiated core instruction as well as a "Core +" layer of support for struggling learners. This makes the inclusion of students with special needs more successful as the instruction is already designed and accustomed to students at varying instructional levels and focused on student growth.

Strong RtI programming and structures also alleviate the special education teacher from being the "go to" for all academically and behaviorally struggling learners. While well intended this pulls from the services that special education teachers could/should be providing to students. The lack of a systemic and fully-staffed RtI model has made the implementation of a more inclusionary model for special education even more difficult. RtI system implementation costs will be addressed in a separate staffing request at the April regular Board of Education meeting.

Professional Development: Professional development will be necessary for all levels in the delivery and structures to best support a greater inclusionary special education model that is consistently implemented K-12. Professional development opportunities will be designed to support appropriate student placements that assist the District in transitioning to a more inclusive model. Professional development costs will be addressed through allocation of existing pupil services, office of instruction and/or Title 2 budgets.

Adequate Special Education Staffing:

Adequate staffing means that teachers have the time to provide the level of support that students with disabilities may require or need in order to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible that he/she has on their caseload.

Current district staffing levels are inconsistent between elementary and secondary levels. Across the four elementary school buildings, average caseloads range from 8.5 students per teacher to a district elementary high of 9.67 students per teacher. At the secondary level, caseloads range from 14.83 at the Middle School to 20.17 students per teacher at the High School. Caseloads are determined by the total number of cross categorical students divided by the total building special education teacher FTE. The disparity in caseload size makes it difficult to provide the same or comparable level of inclusionary programming at the secondary levels as compared to the elementary levels.

The elementary levels are currently at an adequate staffing level to continue to provide quality integrated programming to students with disabilities and require no additional FTE at this time.

The secondary buildings both require additional special education teacher FTE to accomplish successful transition, implementation, and sustaining of an integrated delivery model.

One would question why staff wouldn't be transferred from the elementary schools to the secondary levels to balance caseload sizes across the District. When there are only two special education staff members in a building, the removal of one staff member would drastically increase caseload sizes from 8.5 to 17 students per teacher on average. Obviously, this then creates a disproportionality at the elementary school and inevitably we are only shifting the problem from one level to another. Shared special education staff serving cross categorical students is ineffective due to individual student needs arising at unprescribed times. Additionally, limiting a young child's access to his/her special education teacher or providing inconsistent services is not considered appropriate programming and/or services.

To establish adequate staffing levels at the secondary level within an integrated programming model, the following staffing additions are recommended:

- Addition of 1.0 FTE special education staff at the Fort Atkinson Middle School
- Addition of 2.0 FTE special education staff at the Fort Atkinson High School

This additional special education teacher FTE brings the Fort Atkinson Middle School average caseload from 14.83 to a more manageable 12.71 and Fort Atkinson High School from 20.17 to, still the highest in the District but a vast improvement, at 15.13.

The secondary staffing additions will allow opportunity for the following:

- Greater inclusionary programming at the middle school
- Allow for the strengthening of inclusionary programming at Fort Atkinson High School
- Allows for many combinations of options available to students and special education teachers when designing programming
- Creates a single, seamless, and unified services delivery system for K-12 students
- Embraces the legal mandates to educate students alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible
- This allows for secondary students to have access to the same high academic rigor as their non-disabled peers.

Fiscal Impact

Total expenditure for additional 3.0 FTE Special Education teaching staff is \$198,000 (\$66,000 total package budgeted per teacher).

To meet this additional cost, the following budget strategies are recommended:

- Attrition of 1.5 FTE of vacant Special Education Aide positions (3 half-time positions)
 - Recurring Cost Savings: \$ 23,832.00
- Upon District request based on student readiness, 1 student has returned from out-of-district placement.
 - Recurring Cost Savings: \$ 50,000.00
- Two additional students currently in out-of-district placements are eligible, based on current needs, to return to the District and receive local services
 - Recurring Cost Savings: \$80,000
- High Cost student claims never made before in SDFA
 - New Recurring Revenue (as long as the students remain in the District): \$20,000.00 (low estimate, likely to be more)

Total Budget Reallocation: \$173,832.00

The remaining \$24,000.00 of need will be achieved through attrition of further special education aide positions as they become vacant throughout the 2015-2016 school year. The additional special education teacher staffing across the District should make the transition to fewer aides reasonable.