



District
Management
Group

DMGROUP IN ACTION

Rethinking Special Education Practices: Montclair Public Schools (NJ)

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We had to acknowledge that we were serving fewer students with more resources, and we were not fully aware of how those resources were impacting outcomes.

DMC IN ACTION

Rethinking Special Education Practices

MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Challenge

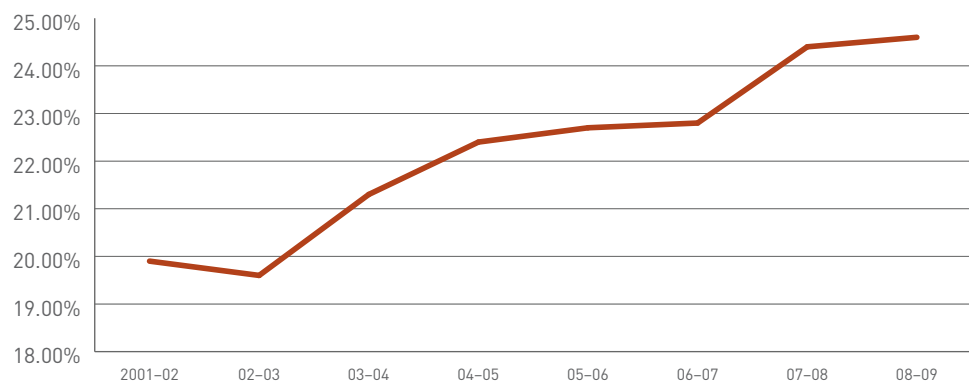
During a full-day data retreat, a persistent though often-neglected achievement gap once again drew the attention of Montclair Public School (MPS) leaders: students with disabilities were not performing to expectations. In fact, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers was increasing. This was occurring despite increased attention, effort, and investment.

Special education costs had increased from 20% to 25% of the total budget from 2000 to 2008 (Exhibit 1). The district's achievement gap in English between students with and without disabilities ranged from 18% in some grade levels to 54% in others, whereas the Math achievement gap ranged from an 8% difference in some grades to a 57% difference in others. This was all within the context of declining state and federal funding.

EXHIBIT 1

Special education expenditures as a percentage of MPS' total budget

Total 2008 special education expenditures exceed \$27 million



Source: Montclair Public Schools

DMC In Action profile the District Management Council's consulting engagements, which help districts improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation.

The question was where to begin. Special education is a difficult program area to examine due to complicated regulatory and compliance factors, as well as service provision guidelines that can be daunting to review and understand.

The Approach

ANALYZING THE CHALLENGE

DMC was brought in to analyze MPS's current practices, compare these to best practices, and benchmark these practices against those of other like-districts in the state and around the nation. DMC's analysis of current practices involved surveys, focus groups, interviews with parents and staff, and classroom visits. It also included detailed analysis of financial and operation data on related services, out-of-district placements, transportation, and reimbursement.

THE FINDINGS

This analysis revealed four areas in which the district could improve its practices:

1. The role and scheduling of paraprofessionals

70% of students receiving paraprofessional support did so because of academic need; however, academic support would be more effective coming primarily from core content teachers and intervention staff. Also, paraprofessional support was often provided for the full day, rather than at specific times when support was needed; this practice often discouraged students' skill-building and self-reliance.

2. Equity in the delivery of speech and language services

MPS had more speech and language therapists compared to like-districts, and there was much variation in caseloads from school to school.

3. Increasing in-district programming

Out-of-district placements were growing, and accounted for nearly a quarter of all special education spending. Students were being sent on long bus rides and were not being educated with their typically developing peers in an inclusionary model.

4. Raising achievement of students with special needs

Analysis revealed that the needs of most students with mild to moderate disabilities were very similar to those of struggling peers without disabilities.

TAKING ACTION

Changing practices within the district involved changing the way everyone thought about supporting students with disabilities. Cross-functional teams were created to investigate each of the four target areas, and each team was charged with a three-step process: understanding the issue, defining a solution, and preparing for change. Working in conjunction with the central office and DMC, the district took action on each target area. →

FAST FACTS: Montclair Public Schools Fast Facts (2011–2012)

11
schools

6,657
students

1,188
students with IEPs

18%
IEP rate

Source: Montclair Public Schools

1. The role and scheduling of paraprofessionals

The team worked to define the role for paraprofessionals, and then proceeded to set protocols. With the help of DMC's dmPlanning® and dmStaffing® tools, the district was able to generate more-efficient schedules to meet the parameters that the committee had set.

2. Equity in the delivery of speech and language services

Similarly, the cross-functional team worked to set protocols around delivery of services to students, and to define scheduling protocols. Again, with the help of DMC's dmPlanning® and dmStaffing® tools, the district was able to generate more equitable scheduling to meet the needs of students.

3. Increasing in-district programming

The team analyzed which programs could be effectively provided in-district and built staffing models to support those programs.

4. Raising achievement of students with special needs

The team recognized that adding remediation classes in core subjects would raise achievement not only for students with special needs but for other struggling students. The cross-functional team identified ways to double the time on task for many groups of students.

Results

All these efforts have improved delivery of services to students with disabilities. In addition, greater coordination and efficiency have resulted in cost savings that exceeded \$4 million within the first two years.

- Changes in scheduling speech and language services made the schedules more equitable and resulted in nearly \$200,000 in savings in the first two years alone.
- Increased in-district offerings had significant benefits; students no longer had to travel far out of the district and could be part of the school community. Staff in the district also developed increased capacity and expertise in serving students with special needs because they had access to the practices and approaches of the in-district programs. In two years, nearly \$1 million was saved by bringing students back into the district.
- Addressing the role and scheduling of paraprofessionals has led to greater student independence, greater equity among staff, and \$3.3 million in savings in the first two years.
- Adding remediation programs has doubled the learning time from content-strong teachers, has increased achievement, and has enabled greater integration with general education. ♦

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— Frank Alvarez,
Superintendent of Montclair
Public Schools (2012)