



District
Management
Group

DMGROUP IN ACTION

DMGroup Helps Shape Sweeping Special Education Reform Across Vermont

by Nate Levenson

Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.24, Fall 2018

*These changes are good for
students—and for the budget.*

DMGroup in Action

DMGroup Helps Shape Sweeping Special Education Reform Across Vermont

Nate Levenson

Sweeping changes to special education have eluded most schools, districts, and states. It's not because stakeholders are enamored with the current system; it's that it has been virtually impossible to build broad support and agreement on how to improve the situation. The only things stakeholders readily agree on are that student achievement results aren't good enough, costs are high and rising, and teachers are stressed.

In May 2018, all that changed in Vermont with the enactment of legislation H.897. A broad coalition of superintendents, special education directors, school board members, academics, parents, policy advisors, and legislators joined forces to dramatically change how struggling students with and without disabilities will be served, how funds will be provided, and what supports the state's Agency of Education will provide. Many of the changes will officially take effect in school year 2020-2021, but districts across the state are already beginning to change how they serve students who struggle. Such changes include the following:

- Ensuring all students receive 100% of core instruction in ELA and math and are never pulled out during this critical instructional time
- Providing extra time during the day, every day, for intervention and remediation
- Having only highly skilled and trained staff provide academic support to struggling students as opposed to having paraprofessionals provide academic support
- Expecting general education teachers to take the lead in teaching all students
- Allowing special educators to play to their strengths, rather than attempt to be jacks-of-all-trades
- Expanding social, emotional, and behavioral supports by focusing on prevention, adding more expertise in schools, and partnering with outside agencies

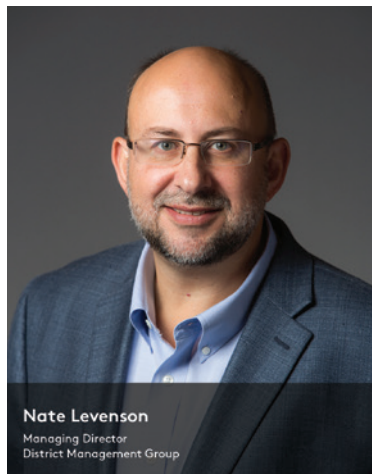
These changes are good for students—and for the budget. With these changes, students who struggle, with or without disabilities, will get the support they need from the most skilled staff, whether or not they have an IEP.

The Idea Takes Hold

Although the Vermont law passed with much support, the journey to its creation and enactment began without much notice. Since 2012, DMGroup Managing Director Nate Levenson had been speaking at a variety of events with Vermont superintendents, school board members, and business officers to share best practices for serving struggling students. Despite Nate's

A broad coalition joined forces to dramatically change how struggling students with and without disabilities will be served, how funds will be provided, and what supports the state's Agency of Education will provide.

account of successful implementation of these practices in other districts across the country, he initially encountered skepticism that these practices could work in Vermont. “Can we really afford to rely on reading teachers instead of paras?” they asked. “How will we find time in the schedule for all struggling students? This is Vermont. What makes you think these ideas can work here?”



Vermont *is* a special place. Its residents value education, spend the most per pupil in the nation when adjusted for cost of living,¹ and have great respect for their many neighbors who work as paraprofessionals. But Vermont is also a state with small schools with declining enrollment, fierce local control, small central offices, and a limited pool of potential staff. If special education reform was elusive across the country, Vermont did not seem like fertile ground for innovative solutions to take root. Yet, given the significant achievement gap between students with and without disabilities coupled with the mounting pressure from the Governor and taxpayers to rein in per-pupil spending, there was a mounting sense of urgency.

Two Districts Help Show the Way

The Vermont superintendents’ association, with support from the school board association, encouraged districts to test the waters. Two school districts, Champlain Valley School District and Franklin West Supervisory Union, stepped up to the plate and engaged DMGroup in 2014-2015 to review their current practices and map a path toward implementing best practices.

These two districts were generally high-performing, but, as in many districts, the achievement gap for students from poverty or with disabilities was large and stubborn, despite high levels of spending. DMGroup’s review revealed many practices sharply at odds with best practices, including the following:

- Heavy reliance on paraprofessionals to provide academic support
- Limited role of general education teachers in helping struggling students
- Frequently pulling students out of core instruction for “extra help,” which meant this help was not “extra” but “instead of” core instruction
- Limited expertise for behavior management at the school level

“It seems the more a student struggles, the further we pull them from our most skilled teachers,” one superintendent commented soberly. After digesting these findings, both districts committed to implementing best practices. Over the subsequent few years, these districts shifted staffing, services, and schedules to provide more and better supports from highly-skilled staff, make core instruction sacrosanct, and add extra learning time. Soon, outcomes improved while costs were better controlled.

Success Breeds Momentum and Support

The success and enthusiasm of these pioneering districts helped shift the conversation statewide from “Can these ideas work in Vermont?” to “How widely applicable are these ideas to districts across the state?” As more superintendents, school board members, and special education directors contemplated this different approach to meeting the needs of struggling students with and without special needs, members of the state legislature and the Agency of Education became intrigued.

The Vermont Legislature decided to take action, and commissioned a series of studies. The first study resulted in the 2016 Picus report, which examined Vermont education and spending. The report revealed that Vermont over-identifies students and may have spent about 10% more than necessary in the 2014-15 school year.² This led the Vermont Legislature to commission a study by the University of Vermont focused on how the state pays for special education, and an additional study by DMGroup regarding best practices.³

For its study, DMGroup offered to work with 10 districts or supervisory unions to review and assess their practices and compare them with best practices. This effort was oversubscribed, and so 10 districts/supervisory unions were selected to create a representation of the state as a whole. Over the course of a year, more than 800 educators were interviewed; 1,100 staff shared the details of their weekly schedules; and hundreds of classrooms were visited. DMGroup also reviewed and analyzed data on staffing, spending, and student achievement.

Analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data revealed a statewide trend: nearly every school had practices quite similar to those observed at Champlain Valley School District and Franklin West Supervisory Union. Despite having limited interactions, each school had adopted similar practices to help students who struggle. The review of practices at the 10 districts revealed the following:

- Few struggling students received extra time to learn with a certified teacher.
- 52% of special education teachers at secondary schools supported students in three or more core subjects each week.
- 66% of support staff were special education paraprofessionals, 27% were special education teachers, and only 7% were general education interventionists, such as reading or math specialists.

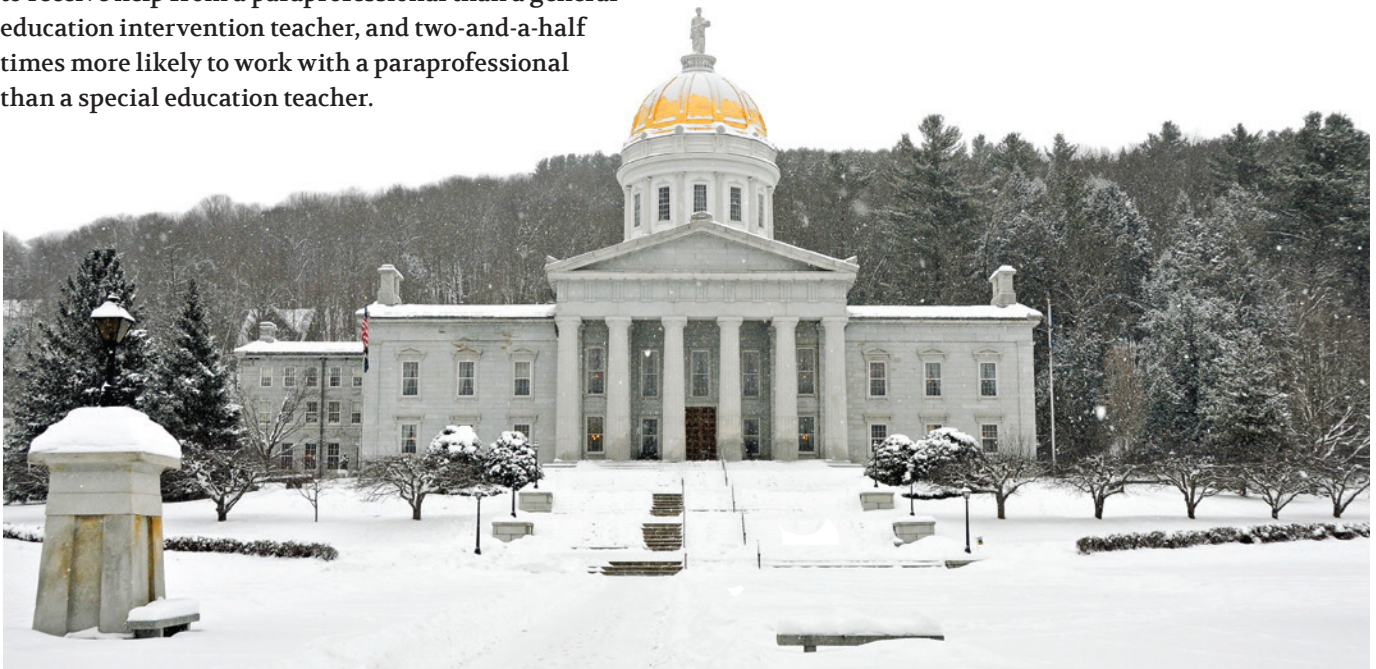
In short, a struggling student was 10 times more likely to receive help from a paraprofessional than a general education intervention teacher, and two-and-a-half times more likely to work with a paraprofessional than a special education teacher.

In the fall of 2017, DMGroup shared the findings in a report entitled *Expanding and Strengthening Best-Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle*. The DMGroup report showed that best practices don't have to cost more than current practice and, over time, should cost less while also reducing teacher burnout and lessening the impact of the special education teacher shortage.

Consensus to Change

After positive statehouse testimony from superintendents, special education directors, school board members, DMGroup, University of Vermont faculty, and others, it became clear that there was much support and little opposition to implementing many of the recommendations from the reports by the University of Vermont and DMGroup. However, key obstacles remained:

- An existing funding mechanism encouraged the use of special education paraprofessionals rather than highly skilled general education teachers.
- A funding formula encouraged higher levels of special education identification and services, rather than general education interventions.
- Classroom teachers needed additional support to learn new pedagogical methods and approaches.
- Finding extra time to schedule supports for struggling students was essential.



In March 2018, the Vermont House of Representatives unanimously passed H.897, which revises the special education funding formula, identifies regulatory barriers to implementing best practices, and provides districts with the technical support needed to phase in over three to five years⁴ the new approaches identified in the DMGroup study. Soon thereafter, the Senate passed the bill, and the bill was signed by the governor on May 25, 2018.⁵ The state of Vermont committed all of its schools to turn away from long-held traditions and embrace best practices for the benefit of struggling students, stressed teachers, and stretched taxpayers.

These changes are good for students—and for the budget.

To date, more than a dozen districts are phasing in changes, and many more are in the planning stages. DMGroup will continue to provide implementation support, scheduling expertise, advice on regionalized hiring of highly specialized staff, and professional development to cohorts of districts. While much hard work lies ahead, there is a great sense of optimism and energy that better results can be achieved for the students of Vermont. ♦



Vermont H.897

Summary of Relevant Elements

H.897 strives to enhance the effectiveness, availability, and equity of services provided to all students who require additional support,* including students receiving special education services and students who need additional support but do not receive special education services. The bill changes the funding model for special education from a reimbursement model to a census-based model, which provides more flexibility in how funding can be used, is aligned with the state's priorities of serving students who require additional support across the general and special education service-delivery systems, and simplifies administration.

The law includes provisions for training teachers and staff, providing technical assistance with the goal of embedding these special education services best practices: (1) ensuring core instruction meets most needs of most students; (2) providing additional instructional time outside core subjects to students who require additional support, rather than providing interventions in place of core instruction; (3) ensuring students who require additional support receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers; (4) creating or strengthening a system-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and (5) providing specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts to students with more intensive needs.

*The law defines a "student who requires additional support" as one (1) who is on an individualized education program; (2) who is on a section 504 plan; (3) who is not on an IEP or section 504 plan, but whose ability to learn is negatively impacted by a disability, social, emotional, or behavioral needs, or because the student is otherwise at risk; (4) for whom English is not the primary language; or (5) who reads below grade level.

Excerpted from Vermont Superintendents Association, Education Legislative Report, issue #9, May 16, 2018.

NOTES

- ¹ Tiffany Danitz Pache, "Special Education Students Could Be Better Served for Less, Studies Say," *VT Digger*, February 4, 2018, <https://vtdigger.org/2018/02/04/struggling-vermont-students-could-be-better-served-for-less-studies-say/>. Accessed September 8, 2018.
- ² Tiffany Danitz Pache, "Study: State Spends 10 Percent More Than Needed on Education," *VT Digger*, February 3, 2016, <https://vtdigger.org/2016/02/03/study-state-spends-10-percent-more-than-needed-on-education-study-state-could-spend-10-percent-less-on-education/>.
- ³ Tiffany Danitz Pache, "Special Education Funding Bill Sails Through House," *VT Digger*, March 23, 2018, <https://vtdigger.org/2018/03/23/special-education-funding-bill-sails-through-house/>.
- ⁴ Vermont Superintendents Association, Education Legislative Report, issue #9, May 16, 2018, <https://mailchi.mp/8fbfd3db87e2/2017-education-legislative-update-714425?e=74c46f67f0>.
- ⁵ "Governor Phil Scott Signs Bill to Improve Effectiveness of Special Education Services at Vermont Public Schools," Office of Governor Phil Scott, State of Vermont, press release, May 25, 2018, <http://governor.vermont.gov/press-release/governor-phil-scott-signs-bill-improve-effectiveness-special-education-services>.