


DMGROUP IN ACTION

Improving Supports for Struggling Students at Indian Prairie School District 204 (IL): Strategic Scheduling Paves the Way

by Amram Migdal, Marissa Silapaswan, and Carolyn Schoen

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Strategic Scheduling Paves the Way

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Indian Prairie School District 204 (IL) Superintendent Karen Sullivan was focused on improving supports for struggling students. Located outside of Chicago, Indian Prairie School District (IPSD) is a relatively high-achieving suburban district of 28,000 students, boasting high graduation rates along with ELA, Math, and SAT scores above state averages. Yet, the district faced persistent achievement gaps for struggling students,¹ including those with and without disabilities, despite considerable investments in strengthening intervention efforts.

To better understand how IPSD might improve supports for students who struggle, Superintendent Sullivan decided to embark upon a thorough study of the district's existing intervention programs and practices, and engaged District Management Group (DMGroup) to perform a review of the district's supports and intervention delivery efforts. The review revealed that while many positive efforts were underway, intervention practices and delivery models varied widely among IPSD's 33 schools and there were opportunities for the district to align with best practices to benefit not only students who struggle, but all students in the district.

A crucial insight was that scheduling was among the greatest barriers to effective delivery of intervention services. DMGroup recommends that students that need

additional supports have access to dedicated time for interventions, with teachers who have content expertise in the subject area of need; these dedicated periods need to be scheduled in addition to, rather than instead of, core instruction. Best practices call for all elementary students to receive uninterrupted access to core instruction, including math and reading blocks, with their general education teachers (see *Exhibit 1*). But at IPSD, as in many districts across the country, resource and scheduling constraints prevented these practices from being consistently applied across the district. Budget cuts had forced reductions in specials staffing, making it increasingly difficult for the district to build intervention blocks into school schedules.



IPSD teachers and staff

FAST FACTS



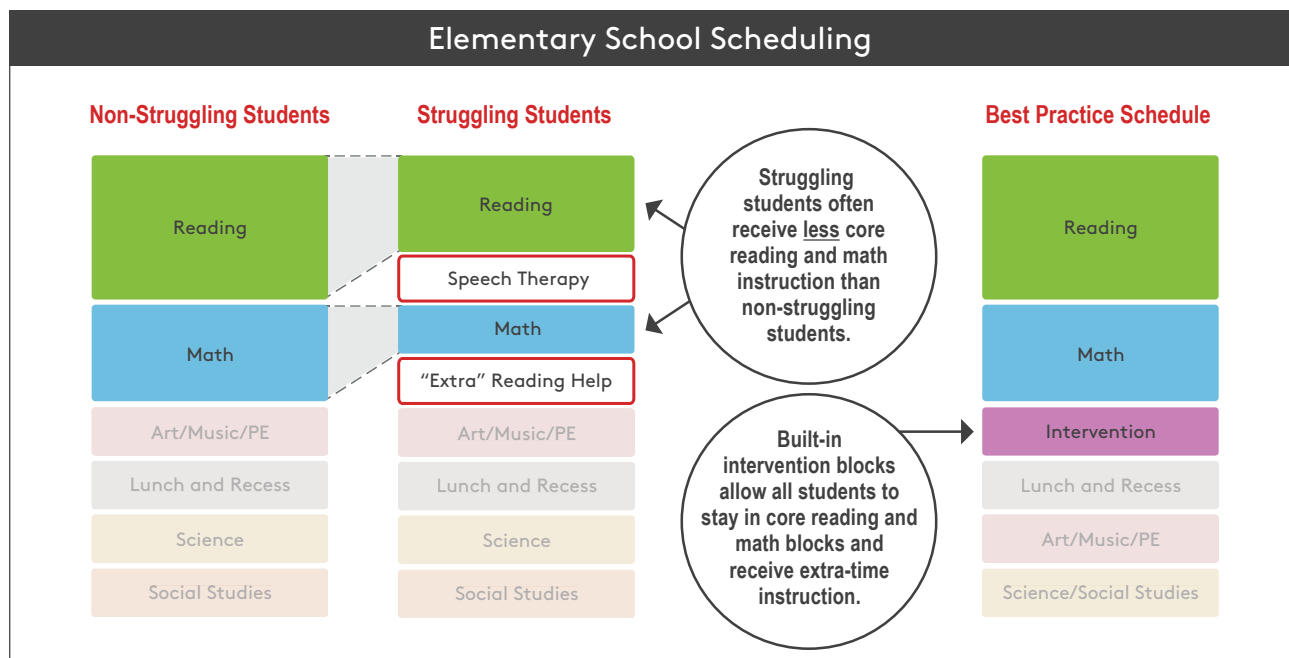
Total
Schools:
33

28,000 students

- 46.5% White
- 28.1% Asian
- 11.6% Hispanic
- 9.0% Black
- 4.5% Mixed Race
- 0.2% Native American

Total
Employees:
3,100

Exhibit 1 EXAMPLES OF TYPICAL NON-STRUGGLING AND STRUGGLING STUDENT SCHEDULES COMPARED WITH BEST-PRACTICE SCHEDULE



Source: District Management Group

Now, in its work with DMGroup, the district wanted to seize the opportunity to return to its previous scheduling practice for intervention blocks, as well as to implement other best practices.

In SY2017-18, IPSD began the process of rethinking its approach to scheduling so that it could implement the recommended instructional and scheduling best practices. With DMGroup's assistance, the district launched a pilot program at several elementary schools, led by Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools Laura Devine-Johnston; the program was expanded in SY2018-19 to all its elementary schools. The teachers and staff at IPSD have learned about best practices for serving students who struggle, and central office and building leaders have used DMGroup's scheduling software to implement a new approach to scheduling that supports dedicated daily intervention time and other best practices.

The Work Begins: Diagnosing Current Supports

From the fall of 2016 through the spring of 2017, district leaders and principals worked with DMGroup to conduct a review of IPSD's existing intervention programs and practices to help understand the district's current model and needs.

The study found that IPSD's staff were passionate and committed to ensuring all students succeed. The district had already introduced important programs to enrich student learning, including in-house supports to serve students with severe disabilities and a strong early intervention program for pre-K. However, DMGroup found opportunities to further strengthen supports. Key recommendations included the following:

Total Operating Budget:
\$368m

Per Pupil Expenditure:
\$13,337

Four-Year Graduation Rate:
95.5%

Special-Education Students:
11.5%

Average PARCC ELA/Math:
55/54
(State Average 37/32)

¹ "Struggling students" are defined as students with IEPs for mild-to-moderate disabilities and students who struggle academically but do not have an IEP.

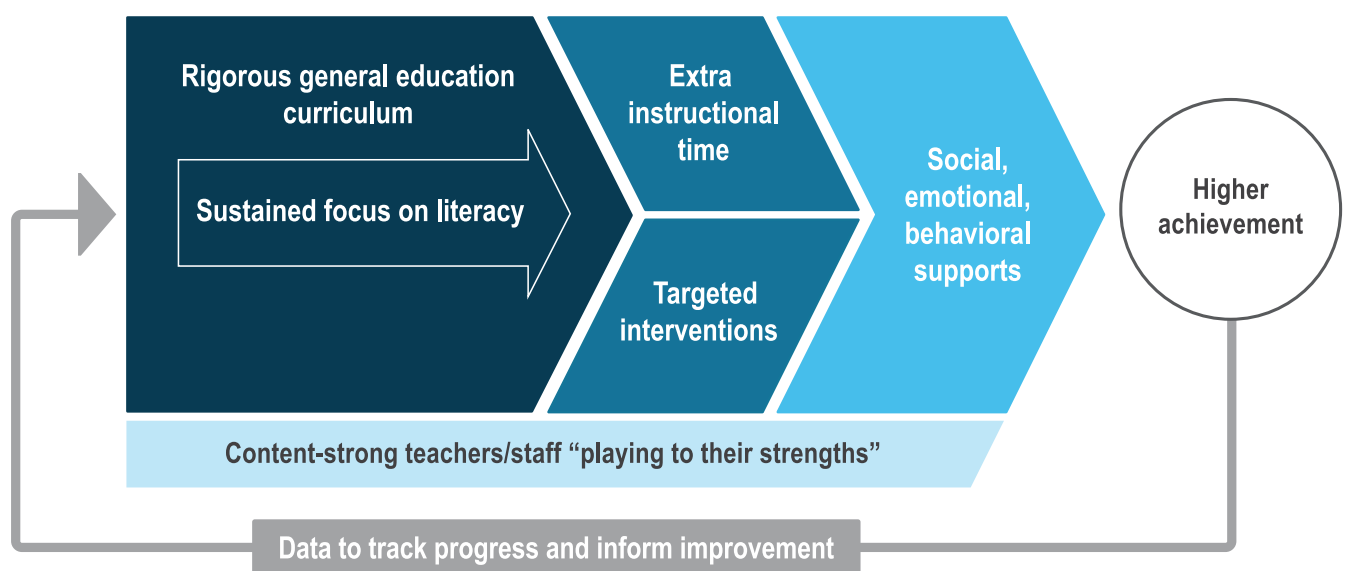
1. Provide more guidance for the creation and implementation of a districtwide framework for response to intervention (RTI) that is consistent across schools. Intervention and enrichment (I/E) practices and service delivery models were found to vary widely among the district's 33 schools.
2. Provide additional instructional time for intervention so all students can master grade-level content. This intervention support should be provided with content-knowledgeable teachers in addition to, rather than instead of, core instruction, ensuring all elementary students receive uninterrupted access to core instruction with their general education teachers.
3. Streamline meetings and paperwork so that staff have more time to spend with students and thereby to expand social, emotional, and behavioral supports.
4. Consider specializing key roles within the special education service delivery model to improve academic performance of students with mild-to-moderate disabilities.
5. Closely manage groupings and size of groups to expand the reach of related services.

As in many districts, an important barrier to implementing these best practices was the schedule. For example, despite best intentions, attempts to include extra help for struggling students sometimes resulted in students being pulled out of core reading and math instruction, as scheduling constraints made any other time seem impossible. DMGroup recommended that IPSD adapt its approach to scheduling and develop clear guidelines for time that must remain uninterrupted and time that is eligible for push-in or pull-out services; guidelines for how students should be grouped by area of need; standards for how large those groups should be; and targets for the proportion of time staff should spend directly supporting students (see *Exhibit 2*).

A New Approach to Scheduling

During the summer of 2017, IPSD and DMGroup facilitated meetings with all 21 elementary principals to share instructional and scheduling best practices, introduce key concepts for supporting struggling students, and set scheduling priorities—a fundamental first step for bringing school leaders into the process. The meetings sparked a powerful interest among principals, who valued the opportunity to focus on how improved scheduling benefits all students, including students who struggle.

Exhibit 2 DMGROUP FRAMEWORK FOR SUPPORTING STRUGGLING STUDENTS



Source: District Management Group.

Following the informational meetings, seven elementary principals participated in a SY2017-18 pilot program to try a more strategic approach to scheduling to improve delivery of intervention services. The pilot program gave these enthusiastic principals an opportunity to familiarize themselves and their instructional leadership teams (ILTs) with DMGroup's approach to scheduling as well as DMGroup's elementary scheduling software tool, and the results were positive. Principals were enthusiastic about scheduling changes as well as the customized, ongoing support and thought partnership from DMGroup. They became champions for the work, helping to gain district-wide buy-in. Their advocacy helped build support for an initiative to develop scheduling priorities at schools across the district for the fall of 2018.

Scheduling as a Team Sport

For SY2018-19, DMGroup worked with principals at each elementary school to develop a set of scheduling priorities for the year. Principals then brought the activity back to their ILTs and set priorities as a group. For many principals, this way of collaborating—"scheduling as a team sport"—was a novel concept and significantly altered the way they thought about the scheduling process. Undertaking scheduling as a collaborative activity enables better-aligned scheduling priorities and helps build buy-in by engaging staff as they seek to change embedded practices. "The power of the experiences was that the conversations about scheduling became instructional instead of logistical," said Devine-Johnston. "Principals talked about the value of working with their teams and focusing on instruction rather than spending time overcoming scheduling obstacles."

Changing Scheduling Practices

Analysis of the existing schedules revealed something many might find surprising: the schedule of specials staff was actually impeding the implementation of instructional and intervention best practices. Although the district had made a lot of progress in sharing specials staff across schools, some staff-sharing practices prevented grade-level homerooms from having I/E blocks all at the same time.

Scheduling I/E blocks at the same time across a grade supports efficient use of staff time and expands the reach of staff members. It provides intervention and enrichment staff the opportunity to flexibly group students from across homerooms and "flood" their support to one grade at a time.

A crucial insight was that scheduling was among the greatest barriers to effective delivery of intervention services.

DMGroup helped IPSD district leaders and principals build a district-wide plan to share specials staff that aligned with best practices and established common guidelines across schools. For example, the decision was made to lift restrictions on scheduling specials at the end of the day or right before or after lunch, which previously kept schools from aligning specials by grade. "Having a system for scheduling specials consistently across the district makes sharing staff much easier," Devine-Johnston said.

A Promising Start: Strategic Scheduling to Support Struggling Students

Since the spring of 2018 and through SY2018-19, DMGroup has continued to support all IPSD elementary principals in building their master schedules and focusing on scheduling I/E blocks that are consistent across grade-level homerooms. Consistent blocks across grade levels allow for grouping across homerooms, meaning resources can flood an entire grade more efficiently.

Principals continue to display their strong leadership during the process, using the "scheduling as a team sport" philosophy with their ILTs to structure their in-building scheduling work. "ILTs are talking together about their priorities and their non-negotiable times in the instructional day, and principals tell us about the power and value of that experience," reported Devine-Johnston. Principals and ILTs use DMGroup's elementary scheduling software to create building schedules together, and the dynamic nature of the tool allows the team to see the schedule at the same time and visualize the tradeoffs necessary for each grade to get its "scheduling wish list." This capability builds a more collaborative atmosphere and helps shift teacher thinking.

Sullivan and Devine-Johnston are pleased that all 21 IPSD elementary schools now have schedules that include dedicated I/E time blocks of at least 30 minutes, achieving one of the district's intended outcomes (see *Exhibit 3*). An unintended but welcome additional outcome has been the district's improved practices around sharing specials staff districtwide. Ensuring that specials staff members' time is well allocated across the district helps support struggling students, who are now able to stay in class for their essential core instruction in addition to receiving the extra support they need to perform to their potential.

Embracing the Power of Scheduling

According to Devine-Johnston, principals have embraced the changes made to the schedules and the scheduling process. Teachers appreciate having structured I/E time that helps special education colleagues avoid the need to pull struggling learners out of their general education classes. Some homeroom teachers now even volunteer to shift their schedule to facilitate the creation of a schedule that works best for all students and all grades.

"Principals tell us that being able to have intervention blocks to support struggling students has made a big difference," Devine-Johnston said. "Intervention blocks, along with the

team conversations about scheduling, are powerful because they create space to focus on the intervention instead of the logistics. We now have a system that allows principals and their teams to deliver highly effective interventions and sets the expectation that all kids will receive the supports they need." The district's scheduling guidelines are now aligned with best practices and enable consistent delivery of I/E supports at all 21 elementary schools, a positive step for IPSD in its goal to help all students succeed. ♦

"The power of the experiences was that the conversations about scheduling became instructional instead of logistical."

— Laura Devine-Johnston

Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Schools

Exhibit 3 USING DMGROUP'S SCHEDULING SOFTWARE, AN IPSD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CREATED THIS SCHEDULE THAT MEETS THE DISTRICT'S GUIDELINES

	K	1	2	3	4	5	Specials	I/E
9:05am	9:15a - 10a Intervention/Enr Reading	9:15a - 10:05a Specials	9:15a - 11:20a English Language Arts	9:15a - 10:15a Math	9:15a - 10:15a Math	9:15a - 10:15a Math		K
10:05am	10a - 11a English Language Arts	10:05a - 11:55a English Language Arts						
11:05am	11a - 11:10a 11:10a - 12p Specials							
12:05pm	12p - 1p Math	11:55a - 12:40p Intervention/Enr Reading	12:05p Math					
1:05pm	1:05p Lunch	12:45p Lunch						
	1:25p Recess	1:25p - 2:35p Math						
2:05pm	1:40p Rest							
	2:10p - 2:55p Science/Social Studies							
3:05pm	3p Flex Time	2:40p - 3:25p Science/Social Studies	2:40p - 3:25p Science/Social Studies					

Efficiently scheduling specials staff allows all grades to attend each special weekly.

I/E guide promotes grade level I/E scheduling for greater staff efficiency and more effective support grouping strategies.

Source: District Management Group.