



CASE STUDY

Simsbury Public Schools (CT): Innovation through a Rethinking of Special Education

by Nathan Levenson and Amy M. Sutherland

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Simsbury Public Schools: *Innovation through a Rethinking of Special Education*

How does a leader go about challenging conventional wisdom in a district when things seem like they are already well-planned, logical, and based on internal consensus? Further, how do you do this in the face of declining resources? Perhaps most importantly, how do you get an organization to think about meeting goals by doing things *differently*, instead of requesting that everyone simply do *more*?

| BY NATE LEVENSON AND AMY M. SUTHERLAND

Dr. Diane Ullman, superintendent of Simsbury Public Schools (Simsbury) in Connecticut, has been successful at addressing these questions through a continuous improvement mindset that drives all aspects of Simsbury's planning. Despite broad success in many areas, Ullman felt very strongly that there was room to innovate to better meet the needs of students by improving the use of district resources. Beginning with the district's special education students, Ullman knew that the system needed a fresh look to drive higher performance. However, a focus on special education forces a hard look at general education, and the pursuit of change needs to encompass system-wide thinking. Simsbury's decision to embark on a path that would require significant change highlights several key successes in district management; this case can give district leaders and other key stakeholders insight into service innovation, change management processes, as well as specific approaches to improve the quality of special education.

Simsbury, like many districts, had designed its special education programs with a heavy dependence on paraprofessionals, in capacities such as behavior management, academic support, and social support for students with high-functioning autism. None of this, however, has been proven to be helpful for a student in

the long run.ⁱ Similarly, the district was putting a lot of resources into one-on-one speech and language services and reading support, when research demonstrates that students develop better proficiency in those areas when they learn in a group setting.ⁱⁱ The intentions of the old system had been noble: the thought was that if a group model helps students, then individual attention must be better. But, more recent research and best practice models indicated some of Simsbury's programs had been built on outdated assumptions and did not take into consideration the cost-benefit tradeoff.

Ullman had been trying to push for change for several years. "Nothing that I tried really started a

Simsbury Public Schools Fast Facts

- Hartford County, CT
- ~5000 students
- 5-Year enrollment change: -2.0%
- Per-student expenditures: ~\$12,000
- % of expenditures from local revenue: 87.1% (excl. school construction)
- Percent of district expenditures used on special education: 18.3%



Second grade students are eager to show Dr. Ullman what they have been learning.

different dialogue. I really needed to get leverage, and find a way to get the conversation to change about special education.” Despite outcomes that were by many measures admirable, she was troubled by her district’s overall approach, which she felt wasn’t maximally serving its students. A long standing District Management Council (DMC) member, Ullman brought her leadership team into a partnership with DMC in a focused consulting effort—a partnership that would serve to explore and ultimately adopt opportunities that would significantly improve Simsbury’s service to special education students and their families, and would also improve the delivery of related general education services.

Challenging the Culture: Focus on Practice

What set the district on a course to change its approach to special education? It ultimately began with the recognition that the quality of Simsbury’s special education was being compromised by commonly held misconceptions, a comfort with the old way of doing things, and concerns that making programmatic changes involved too much risk.

Explains Ullman, “I realized I was facing as much of a culture problem as a resource problem. My belief is that you don’t change culture by working on culture, but by changing practice.” To make comprehensive improvements to its special education services, Simsbury had to start by determining the nature of the problem that existed in the district and sizing the key elements that were keeping the current practices in place. The district also had the responsibility of communicating to its stakeholders that its primary concern throughout the

process would be improving special education in order to better serve students with special needs.

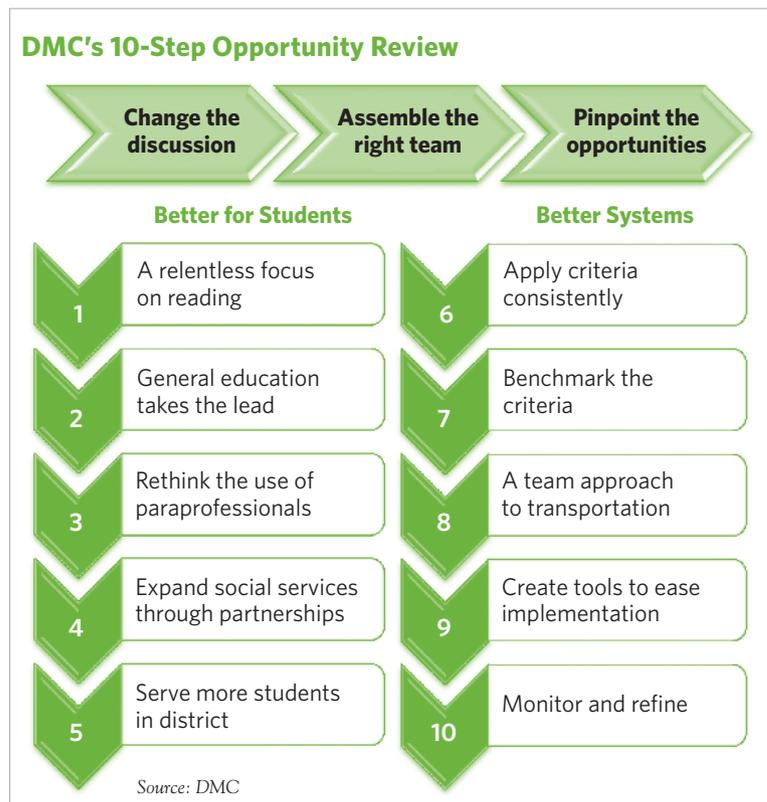
Dr. Ullman was aware that one of the largest obstacles to attempting any change would be the old system itself. She observed that the current 15-year-old system, while constructed with significant thought and careful design, was not supported by current best practices or backed by the most relevant data. Both Ullman and Helen Donaher, Simsbury’s director of special services, describe Simsbury’s starting point as having “well-intentioned, but misinformed assumptions about what is good for kids.”

The factors keeping Simsbury’s initial special education system in place were expansive, and any potential changes had significant ramifications for all stakeholders in the district. Ullman knew that in order to better serve the special education students in Simsbury Public Schools, she, in partnership with the leaders of the district, as well as principals, teachers, and parents would have to communicate a compelling and data-driven vision for how Simsbury Public Schools would improve the special education program. Armed with a strong understanding of the change management process, the district was acutely aware of the importance of engaging everyone in any potential changes. Says Ullman, “If we didn’t get teachers to understand that we were trying to do better, we would be lost.”

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Among Simsbury’s top leadership, a decision was made to actively pursue better and more innovative approaches to the special education system. Ullman had seen presentations on DMC’s Special Education Opportunities Review process (Figure 1) and was intrigued by aspects of the review process. Ullman >

FIGURE 1



and Donaher determined that their organization had the dedication and commitment to serving students, but did not have the resources to collect and analyze data and explore the best improvements it could make to its programs. Through the Special Education Opportunities Review, Simsbury was able to review its special education data in relation to best practices. The leadership was able to examine the existing situation and build understanding and buy-in to pursue recommendations for systemic improvements.

Building Understanding: Objectivity and the Importance of Data

Having the chance to reflect on relevant data is an important step in building understanding for change. As Helen Donaher notes, “In special education, we always have a lot of data around us, but we weren’t used to looking at it in a way that really helped rethink opportunities to improve services.” Betsy Gunsalus, director of elementary curriculum, reflects, “The

DMC team brought two main sources of value to the ongoing discussion in Simsbury: first, a hard look at data in a different way than we were used to, and second, a logical process to guide the district through new recommendations, decision-making, and implementation.” Ullman notes that DMC’s presentation to a key stakeholder group—the Simsbury Board of Education—convinced the district that the new approach was the right one, and allowed public commentary to support forward progress.

In addition to the research, analysis, and guidance of the overall process, DMC’s role in the partnership was also to support understanding, communications, and objective listening within the district. The process began with the DMC team conducting a thorough review of Simsbury’s current offerings. This stage included the collection of data and statistics, interviews, classroom visits, and surveys of parents, IEP teams, and administrators. Second, the team

analyzed all of the data against various local, state, and national benchmarks; they also looked for correlations and trends across the different types of data collected. Finally, Simsbury leaders and the DMC team shared results and recommendations and, most importantly, facilitated the planning of implementation. The process was tailored specifically to the needs of Simsbury, and it was essential that all stakeholders had an opportunity to voice their opinion.

The data component of Simsbury’s special education review was perhaps the most important tool in enhancing understanding throughout the district. For school districts, data-driven inquiry and analysis, when collected and used conscientiously in a review process, has great potential to de-politicize the conversation and keep the focus on objective, student-focused terms. “Uncovering the problem through the use of data was really helpful. The data analysis DMC did wasn’t something I had the resources to put together,” says Ullman.

Specifically, the team was able to examine trends and outliers, and provide Simsbury an ability to look at its

practices through benchmarking—in this case, taking a number of like districts on a variety of special education topics and showing the district how it compared. DMC was able to collect information in a number of domains—staffing ratios, student achievement, spending allotments, special education criteria—and allow Simsbury to make decisions about its programs. In its final report, DMC included recommendations for Simsbury based on the data collected, but the report also allowed the data to speak for itself. Given data of similar districts as well as state and national benchmarks, Simsbury became well-informed about potential improvements it could make to its special education programming.

It was also essential that in the course of the special education review, the district be conscious of both the major internal and external dynamics that would affect any moves it might make. The process would have to engage both those making the decisions as well as those served by the decisions. Ultimately, the key decision-making would be an internal process conducted by the leaders of the district, but it was important for Simsbury Public Schools to create district-wide awareness cultivated through clear communication and feedback access points for all stakeholders. The district had a responsibility to clearly communicate its agenda and concerns as well as communicate with each stakeholder group throughout the process. It had to balance a variety of its own competing concerns—student achievement, service to students, financial limitations, effectiveness of programs—while also tailoring its approach and response to address the concerns of everyone who would be affected by the process.

To create more awareness and understanding, it was also valuable that stakeholders had an opportunity to voice their opinion to an objective party, one of DMC's primary functions. Ullman, Donaher, and Gunsalus all cite having an objective third party as an important factor in the process; having the objectivity of an outsider increased the district's capacity to understand its current systems. Bringing in an outsider can help diffuse some of the tensions that occur when attempting to alter any sort of long-standing system. Says Ullman of the dynamic of using a third party in this process, "There's no blame-placing; it's not punitive. It's more about saying, 'Here's the real deal.' You let data drive the conversation."

Another important aspect of contemplating change

was fostering a culture that included active listening and thoughtful consideration. Just as Simsbury Public Schools' management team was striving to be receptive to new data, Simsbury also understood that it must be receptive to input from all stakeholders. The team understood that listening and giving everyone a say was one of the most important ways to mobilize the community to become involved in improving the system. Further, giving as many stakeholders as possible the opportunity to voice their opinion would serve the district by continually reminding it of the diverse priorities that would have to be managed throughout the change process. Ullman recalls that this was one of the most important steps to both fostering understanding and communicating with stakeholders in the district.

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“There's no way around taking the time to listen to people and providing honest answers. The one-on-one interviewing with paraprofessionals, teachers, parents, and principals—the time to talk, for each of them to have a say, and to have it done confidentially, was critical. I really haven't had many people saying, 'but you don't really understand' because they did have a say. They felt heard in the process. This was a critical step for us, and it can't be rushed,” said Ullman.

Turning Understanding into Real Change

Simsbury had moved from a peripheral awareness of possible opportunities that existed to a data collection and analysis process that engaged stakeholders and enhanced understanding. A needed next step in the change management process was to move the district from understanding to actual “buy-in” by those ▷

affected by proposed changes and further to implementation.

Upon completing its analysis, DMC presented Simsbury with a detailed report that combined the results of all of its data collection methods. The report was organized into two sections—a series of commendations for Simsbury regarding its achievements with its special education programs and a series of opportunities for improvement that DMC had also recognized. The commendations were admirable; Simsbury continues to do well at many things. First, academic achievement of students with special needs is improving and the achievement gap is narrowing. Second, inclusion is embraced in both theory and practice. Third, the Simsbury Public Schools meet the needs of nearly all children in-district. Fourth, the district provides very high levels of service and has a commitment to going above and beyond. And last but not least, Simsbury’s staff have a passion and commitment to ensure that students with special needs achieve academically, socially, and emotionally at high levels.

Based on the data and recommendations by DMC, Simsbury chose to focus on three specific areas:

1. Overuse of paraprofessionals, which leads to less student independence and less instruction from certified teachers.
2. Overuse of speech and language services, which pulls students unnecessarily from core instruction and diverts them from the reading help that they really need.
3. Insufficient and less effective than desired reading intervention and remediation. In Simsbury, roughly 22% of Kindergarten through Grade 5 students got supplemental support, but it wasn’t based on best practices. Reading is the gateway to all learning, and lack of reading was the cause of an above average rate of students with special needs.

A major element sustaining the culture that became apparent when Simsbury began analyzing the opportunities was the sheer momentum of the old system. Ullman recounts that she had tried to reduce the number of paraprofessionals,

but every year, the number would either return to its initial level or increase. “I never got it to budge because the model in our heads told us that ‘this is how we take care of children.’”

Regarding reading, the Simsbury data showed high rates of referral and eligibility in grades K-2, high rates of learning disability and speech impairment, and very high rates of speech and language services. Fundamentally, Simsbury understood that these were all students struggling with reading, and that a comprehensive reading program with intensive remediation and intervention will not only help these students, but also reduce special education costs.ⁱⁱ Illustrated in Figure 3, creating one best-practice program for reading intervention instead of the myriad offerings today would not only improve the delivery of reading instruction, but also could positively impact the financial resources used.

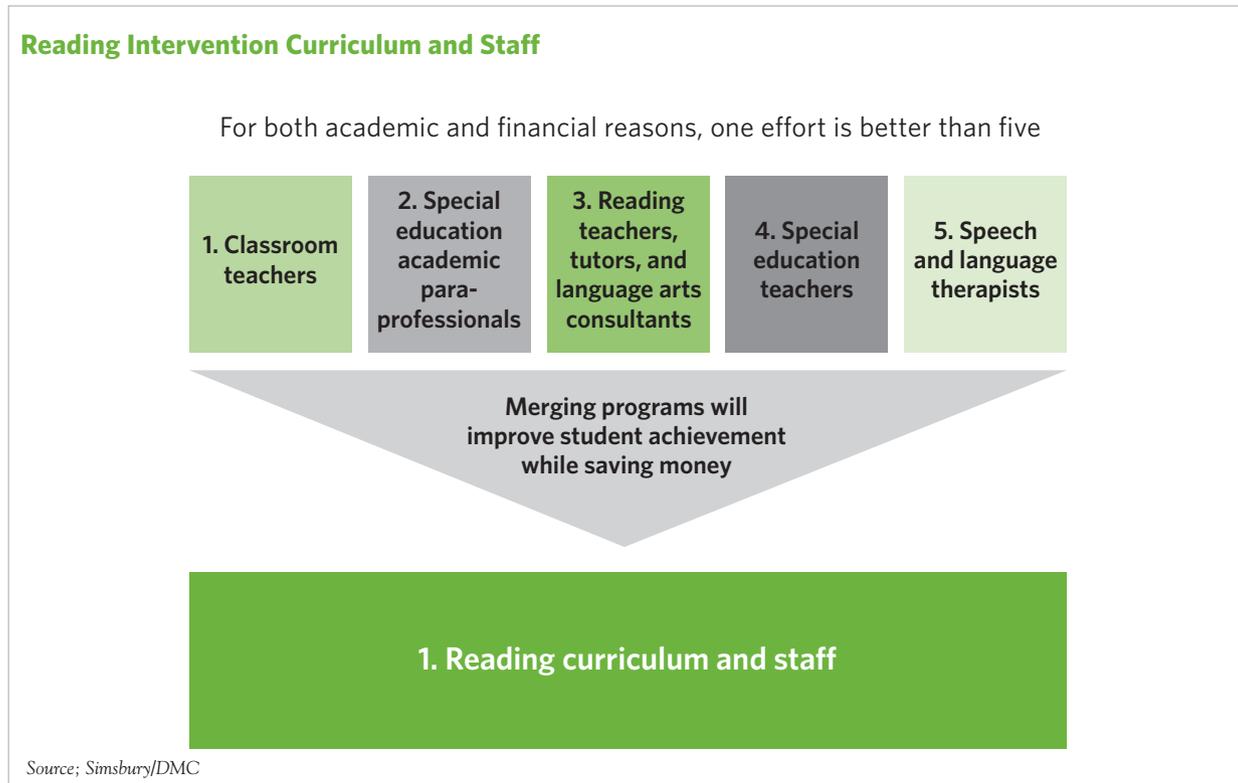
The third main area of change addressed speech and language services. As seen in Figure 2, the district has a higher than typical number of students diagnosed with speech impairments and more students receiving speech and language services. These services also continue at a higher than typical rate at the secondary level. Case loads for speech and language therapists are also low versus peer districts. Either the district has more students with speech and language issues or the district has more expansive eligibility criteria. Recom-

FIGURE 2
Incidence of Special Needs Per 100 Students

	Simsbury	Like Communities	Difference
Learning disability	5.6	3.5	60%
Speech impairment	2.8	2.2	27%
Other health impairment	1.8	2.2	-18%
Autism	1.1	0.9	22%
Other disabilities	0.7	0.6	17%
Emotional disturbance	0.6	0.6	0%
Intellectual disability	0.5	0.3	67%
Total students in special education	13.0	10.4	25%

Source: Simsbury/DMC

FIGURE 3



recommendations centered primarily around development of measurable and uniform criteria.

At this point in the process, Simsbury had the challenge of turning understanding and awareness into buy-in and real solutions for the district. The district had the burden of proving to its stakeholders that any recommendations that it decided to pursue would improve the programs for special education students and not deteriorate an already heavily burdened staff, budget, and sense of parental faith.

Ullman was well aware of the challenges of presenting a compelling vision of an improved special education program in a way that would engage stakeholders. It would require the district to communicate clearly in language and terms that could be understood by all stakeholders with a focus on the factors driving the district to want to improve. It was necessary that the stakeholders understand the “Why?” driving all of the changes. “In a community like ours,” states Ullman, “we teach parents to believe in what we were doing. [To successfully implement any changes]

we had to know that what we were planning was going to be better.”

One of the approaches to foster buy-in has been an internal effort on the part of district leadership. While the desired end result is to create a system that will function better and improve the quality of special education, creating change and buy-in simultaneously can be difficult for those who have to respond to demands that can initially and temporarily increase their workload. Ullman describes one of her biggest responsibilities as the district is undergoing changes as “keeping the vision for what we’re trying to do better, and keeping it visible and making it palpable so we’re willing to endure some discomfort while we get there.”

The district is utilizing a few specific approaches in order to continue to foster understanding and encourage district-wide buy-in. The first is continuing to let data and best practices drive the conversation. Dr. Ullman characterizes one aspect of the old special education system as the following: “[Our data] indicated that our response to kids who weren’t >

learning was to put them in special education classes.” Instead, the district could focus on avoiding this need altogether by increasing reading intervention and remediation early on—a best practice effort. An example of a systemic improvement, the revised approach to reading should not only reduce the number of students who need special education services, but it should also reduce staffing needs, scheduling complexity, and allow funds to be allocated strategically to other student needs. Says Gunsalus, “We haven’t actually faced many barriers in pursuing this. The biggest challenge is defining future roles and responsibilities as we bring changes down to the teacher level.”

“This is not a linear process. I am constantly reminded of how strong the pull is to regress back to old practices,” says Ullman.

Another important aspect of fostering buy-in is allowing stakeholders to see the district moving forward strategically and consistently. Says Ullman, “One critical piece ... is setting up timelines and expectations for when things will get done. This will help us stay the course with the optimism that we can actually do this.” This is particularly crucial in transition periods when new programs are not fully in place. The comfort of the old system is gone, and there is concern about what might be ahead. These are the times when districts must communicate and act clearly and consistently. Ullman cautions that this can be a confusing time because the process of change for a school district is by no means cut-and-dried. “This is not a linear process,” Ullman emphasizes, “I am constantly reminded of how strong the pull is to regress back to old practices.” However, with clear guidelines and timelines, Donaher is hopeful that even the most cautious of stakeholders will be able to see the district’s accomplishments and an endpoint to the challenges of transition. Donaher also notes that the overall process has been successful with internal audiences, but that families are simply harder to convince and need more time.

Ownership of Change: The Role of Innovation

“Innovative solutions to drive continuous improvement” seems to capture the Simsbury leadership team’s approach to management. Each of the solutions being pursued by Simsbury is an innovation to enhance performance. Simsbury is still in the process of finalizing the implementation of several of the changes the district decided to make, but real ownership over the initiatives is apparent. Ullman views the fall and winter of this school year as a crucial point of implementation—the ‘tipping point’ where new programs will start to meet needs. In that sense, the district is transitioning from a point of buy-in to complete ownership as the innovative ideas begin to show real performance results.

To ensure the smoothness of this transition, Ullman is continuing to push forward, keeping many of the same principles and strategies that she has used to help drive these efforts. The district will continue to focus on systems improvement—data-driven initiatives that focus on improving student achievement, parental satisfaction, and staffing while making the system more efficient and reducing costs. The process will continue to require the patience of its stakeholders, because it takes time to restructure and rebuild programs and processes. However, the district is able to move forward with the confidence that the new system, in addition to being well-intentioned, is also well-informed and will have a much greater capacity to serve the stakeholders within the district than it did before.

Key Reflections on the Process

Ullman speaks very highly of the process that the district has gone through, and is able to see the way that improving one system in the district has the potential to improve other systems. She emphasizes that Simsbury’s use of data to drive conversations and decision-making during its special education review has affected the way they approach other discussions and decisions. She sees this change as an overall improvement of her school district’s leadership capacity.

Asked to reflect on the process her district has undergone so far, she has several observations and recommendations for districts struggling with the similar issues. Ullman stresses that it is important to



Dr. Ullman (third from right) helps break ground on a new renovation/addition project at Tariffville Elementary School in June 2008.

take action. “I wish I had started this process three years ago!” she explains, referring to how difficult it can be to find the momentum to begin a comprehensive review process. Nevertheless, she cautions that while targets, timelines, and data are sufficient to set the ball rolling, real acceptance for change only arrives once the results support the theory.

Ullman also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a service mindset by articulating vision and purpose and taking the time to communicate clearly and specifically to the most crucial stakeholders. She feels that parents were a key part of her district’s transition from awareness of its needs to implementation of new programs. Her advice: “Keep parents an active part of the process, and help them understand what you are doing and why.”

It is also important to keep in mind that the process of systemic improvement in Simsbury took the involvement of key players and realizations within the entire system. Ullman cites a wide range of factors when reflecting on Simsbury’s success-to-date. She specifically credits the enthusiasm and coherence of Helen Donaher, Betsy Gunsalus, and other key individuals; Simsbury’s board members’ support; her own commitment; the community’s desire to improve services; the team approach of all of the top leaders in the district; the recognition of the problem as cultural and technical; the decision to address beliefs and practices; and the use of benchmarking data. All of these factors helped drive the effort and inform the decisions that the

district and its stakeholders made from the beginning through the implementation of new programs rolling out this fall and winter.

Conclusion

The case study of Simsbury Public Schools presents a compelling example of a district moving to improve its offerings by increasing its openness to innovation despite functioning systems with significant momentum and support. To change a system, districts must take a systematic approach as Simsbury did. This includes a process that focuses on pursuing deep understanding of the

problem, using data to craft solutions, and enlisting the buy-in of leadership all the way from the top leaders of the district to those who teach or have children in related programs. This requires leadership sustained by a compelling vision of an improved student education, with a leadership team that is willing to engage all stakeholders and incorporate major stakeholder concerns into solutions. The process is not simple or linear as the case of Simsbury illustrates, but the time has never been more opportune to systematically, comprehensively, and innovatively approach the way we serve students with special needs.

ⁱ *Guidelines for selecting alternatives to over reliance on paraprofessionals by Giangreco and Broer, US Office of Special Education, March 2003.*

ⁱⁱ *Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, Seeking Effective Policies and Practices for Students with Special Needs, Spring 2009.*



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