

SPENDING MONEY WISELY

GETTING THE MOST FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGETS



ADDING PRECISION TO REMEDIATION AND INTERVENTION STAFFING LEVELS: Data-driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload

Opportunity Brief • Getting Started • Lessons from the Field

by Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, Claire Sullivan



DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

www.dmccouncil.org

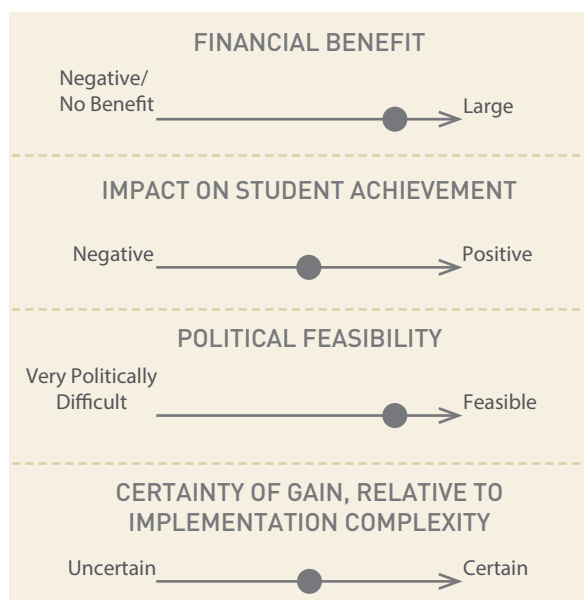
ADDING PRECISION TO REMEDIATION AND INTERVENTION STAFFING LEVELS:

Data-driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload



DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

For many districts, improving the management of remediation and intervention staffing is a significant opportunity to free up funds. In fact, it may be one of the largest opportunities to both reduce costs and raise achievement, with only modest political pushback. While the implementation does take some detailed data collection and cross-departmental leadership, some districts could free up millions of dollars without reducing service and support to students. This may be surprising to many, since principals often report a shortage of academic support staff; however, creating data-driven guidelines for staffing, taking a more active role in scheduling of these services, and proactively reducing time spent in meetings have allowed some districts to reduce the number of staff needed to deliver the same amount of services to students. Since the actual amount of services to students remains constant, pushback from parents is limited. The significant savings can then be used for other strategic initiatives within the district.

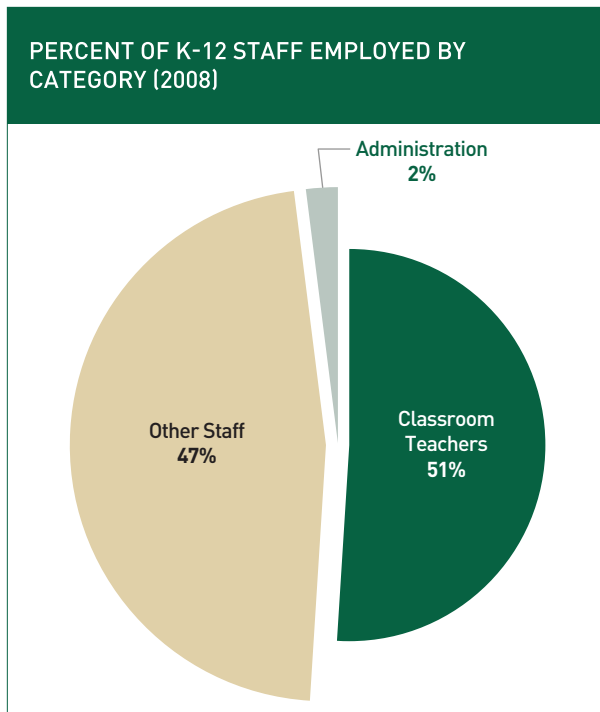


A large cost center

In a typical urban district of 50,000 students, there may be as many as 900 special education, ELL, and Title I teachers, plus 400 special education paraprofessionals. Remediation and intervention staff thus accounts for between a quarter to a third or more of total spending on instructional salaries.

Nationwide, the number of interventionists has grown dramatically, while classroom teachers have declined from 70% of staff employed to roughly 50% in the past six decades (Exhibit 1). Of the real increase in per-pupil spending from 1996 to 2005, 67% of it was allocated to intervention and remediation expenses (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 1



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2010.

Much variation in staffing and spending from district to district

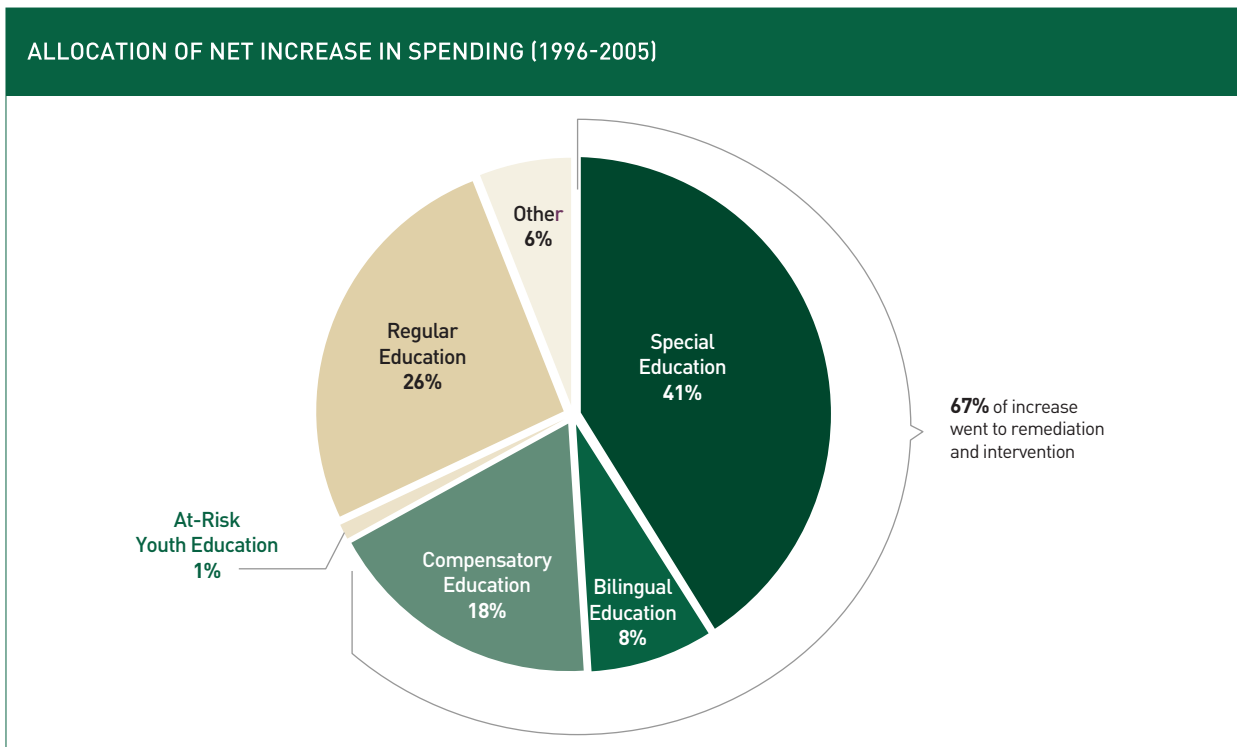
Based on DMC research and experience, district-to-district staffing levels vary greatly, even when normalized for enrollment, demographics, and per pupil spending. For example, some districts have nearly three times as many special education teachers as similar districts, or more than four times as many paraprofessionals; this is the case after adjusting for enrollment and other factors. In nearly all districts with above-average staffing, many principals and central office staff believe that they still have too little academic support staffing.

If districts with above-average special education staffing were able to staff at the national median, collectively they would save over \$10 billion per year. To put this impact into perspective, a 50,000-pupil school district spending at the 90th percentile on special education could save or repurpose upward of \$35 million a year if it had more typical spending.

Few staffing guidelines exist

Despite the large number of staff devoted to remediation and intervention, most districts have limited or imperfect methods for determining how many staff should be assigned to a given school. This stands in stark contrast to the norm for determining general education staffing, which is set by

Exhibit 2



Source: The District Management Council analysis of Juan Diego Alonso and Richard Rothstein, "Where has the money been going? A preliminary update," Economic Policy Institute, October 2010, <http://s2.epi.org/files/page/-/pdf/bp281.pdf>, (accessed November 20, 2013).

carefully managed class-size guidelines or teaching-load guidelines. In general education staffing, it is common to have guidelines such as one classroom teacher for every 24 first graders, or one high school math teacher for every 125 students taking math, for example.

Remediation and intervention staffing decisions seldom have such straightforward rules. Unfortunately, simple rules do not really help. A rule of one special education or ELL teacher for every 25 students who require their service does not take into account the fact that one student may need one hour of support a week while another needs five hours a week, or that some students need one-on-one support while others are supported in groups of five.

Given the complexity of determining staffing needs for remediation and intervention support, staffing is often set by tradition, availability of grant funds, and negotiations between principals and central office administrators. If and when a principal insists that additional staff is needed, negotiation and anecdote, rather than hard data, often drive the discussion.

The Overstaffing Cycle

The lack of precise staffing guidelines often leads to overstaffing. To demonstrate how this occurs, imagine two schools, Washington and Kennedy. Each is assigned ten intervention staff. Based on actual student IEPs, English proficiency levels, reading scores, etc., eight staff members may actually be needed at Washington and twelve may be needed at Kennedy. While the 20 staff in total is adequate, the principal at Kennedy will rightfully insist that more help is needed, while the Washington staff will have lighter workloads, but still will feel busy. Over time, two more staff will likely be added to Kennedy, yet all ten will likely remain at Washington, leading to a net increase of two, from 20 to 22.

Fear of understaffing tends to add urgency to addressing the demands for more help, especially in special education and ESL, since both have state and federal protections and serious consequences for failing to provide mandated services. When a director insists more staff is needed in a given school, the request is accompanied by a reminder – stated or unstated – that failure to meet the IEP or ELL service requirements will result in non-compliance, state sanction, advocate-driven legal proceedings, and/or other negative consequences.

Understaffing and overstaffing lead to some staff's having time to attend lots of meetings, while others are forced to do nearly all of their paperwork outside of school hours. Time studies have shown that in nearly all districts, some remediation and intervention staff work many more hours with students (up to three times more) than colleagues in other schools in the same district.

Improving Equity and Efficiency through Staffing Guidelines

School districts can create data-driven staffing plans for interventionists, meet 100% of student needs, and free up significant funds for redeployment. When done thoughtfully, student achievement should increase as well. The same data that allows the district to more tightly manage the schedule and staff devoted to special education, ELL, and reading also allow districts to better manage the type and effectiveness of the interventions provided to students.

Better managing remediation and intervention staffing levels starts by believing it can and should be managed in a more data-driven way. The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized. In The District Management Council's experience, many directors of special education, ELL, and Title I have managed by professional judgment for years. At the same time, many human resources departments and business offices (departments with experience staffing to guidelines) are uncomfortable managing remediation and intervention staffing, given the

legal complexities and the consequences of non-compliance. Often, only the superintendent can create the desire and the urgency to address this opportunity.

Given a commitment to create data-driven staffing guidelines, districts must then wrestle with the question, "Who should determine the guidelines and manage the process?" Here, the organizational chart and human nature can collide, especially during the transition to more data-driven staffing. The adage, "Never ask a barber if you need a trim," explains why having the special education director, ELL coordinator, or Title I administrator lead this effort often proves insufficient. The individuals in these positions often feel any cuts or changes will lead to non-compliance or hurt students. Neither has to be the case.

Given the complexity of determining staffing needs for remediation and intervention support, staffing is often set by tradition, availability of grant funds, and negotiations between principals and central office administrators.

A team approach, which includes these department heads, but also includes the business office and human resources, can work well. Overall leadership at the deputy superintendent level, and strong encouragement from the superintendent are often necessary.

With the right team assembled, the next step is to determine what data is needed to create thoughtful staffing guidelines. Some required data varies by type of position, but two data points are universally helpful: 1) direct service time and 2) target group size.

Direct service time is the amount of time an academic support teacher, paraprofessional, or tutor is expected to spend providing direct instruction and/or support to students, often measured in hours per week. This highlights a major difference between academic support staff and other staff. Elementary classroom teachers have clearly defined expectations for student contact, such as direct instruction all day, except for a 30-minute lunch and a 45-minute planning period. Secondary teachers also have unambiguous expectations, such as five periods a day, or 25 classes a week. Depending on the role, academic support teachers, in particular, have a wide array of responsibilities beyond providing direct instruction to students including IEP assessments, report writing, attending meetings, and communicating with parents.

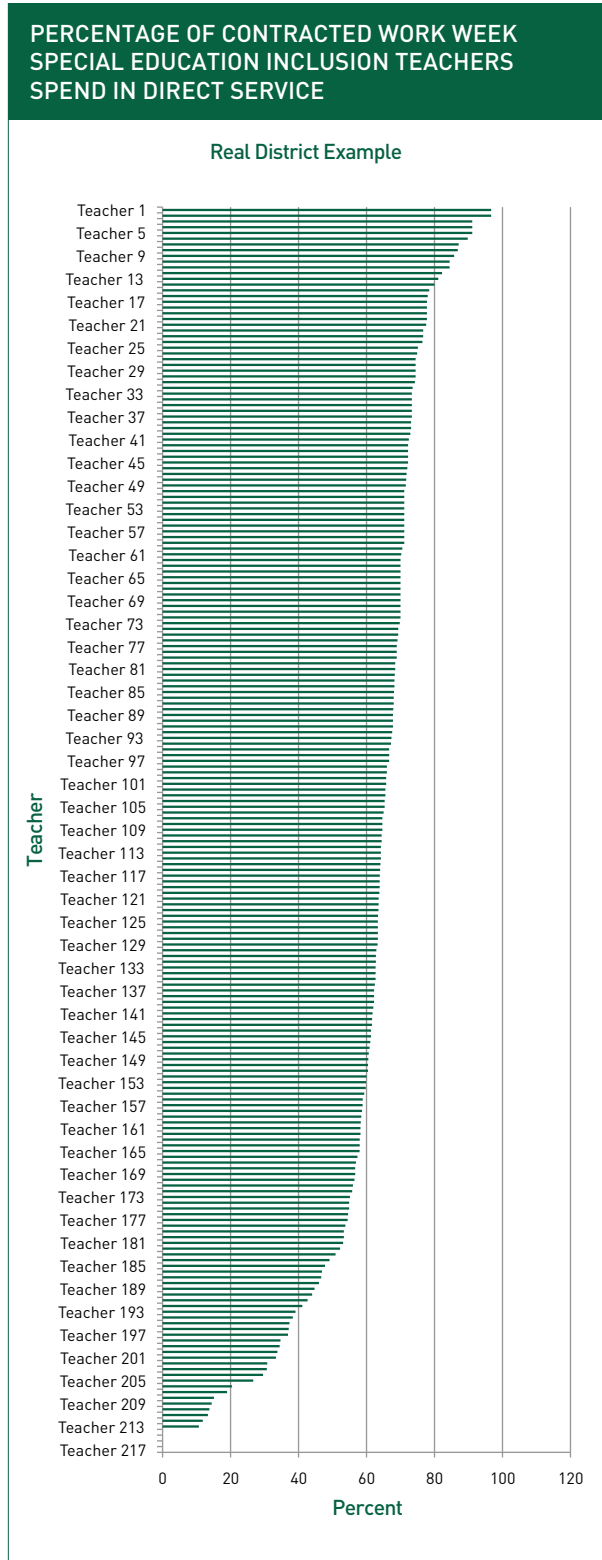
Target group size is the academic support staff’s equivalent of class size. When an academic support teacher is working with children, how many students are they working with at one time?

Beyond these two universal criteria, other role-specific data can be incorporated into thoughtfully creating staffing guidelines. For example, districts may consider the number of initial and three-year IEP evaluations conducted on an annual basis when determining guidelines for school psychologists. They may also measure the percentage of time spent supporting students versus time spent supporting teachers when determining guidelines for reading coaches.

Few districts can push a button and ascertain how much time special education, ELL, Title I, or reading teachers spend with children each week, or how many students they help during each session. The lack of data explains why the opportunity to reduce staff, but not services to students, exists in many districts. Online tools or Excel spreadsheets can help gather and analyze the needed information.

With data on current practices in hand, setting guidelines for expected direct service and average group size is the next step. For districts new to this process, benchmarking can help determine what is reasonable. Internal benchmarks are based on current practices in the district. Since the baseline data typically reveal wide ranges for direct service and group size, many choices for new guidelines exist, but all are possible given the district’s culture and schedule, because they are already being done by some staff in the district (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3



Source: The District Management Council

In most districts, the biggest variable impacting direct service with students is how much time is devoted to meetings. In our studies, time devoted to meetings ranges from 10% to 70% of the week for staff with similar roles serving similar students. District leaders can greatly influence this variable, which in turn greatly impacts required staffing. Roughly speaking, decreasing the time staff spend attending meetings by three hours a week can reduce required staffing levels by 10%. In a typical urban district of 50,000 students, this equates to \$5 million - \$10 million in annual expenses without reducing a minute of service to students or increasing group sizes. It leaves upwards of ten hours a week for meetings.

Setting target group size is a bit more complex, since there are a number of factors at play. While IEPs or state ELL guidelines set some limits, in most districts interventionist preference, building schedules, and tradition carry the day. It is rare that district leaders debate special education, ESL, or reading group size with the same intensity and analysis as they do class size, but both are major drivers of staffing levels. The impact of group size is often underestimated. Moving from an average group size of three to four reduces staffing needs by 25%; moving from a group size of five to six saves more than 15%.

Group size is also indirectly impacted by the “service delivery model.” Service delivery refers to how and where intervention services are provided, such as “push in,” “pull out,” sheltered immersion, resource room, or co-teaching. In many districts, there is not a clear understanding of the impact that service delivery choices have on group size, and thus staffing. For example, a district decided to switch from pulling elementary ELL students out of class (“pull out” model) to having ELL teachers go into general education classes (“push in” model). This was a pedagogical decision made on pedagogical grounds. It also had significant, but unintended staffing

consequences. Before, six students of similar needs could be pulled from up to six different classrooms, thus allowing for an average group of six students. With the switch to a “push in” model, often only two or three students in a given room had similar needs, so group size dropped by half, and the staffing requirements doubled.

Staffing, of course, should not be the only criteria in setting target group size, but it should not be ignored. Guidelines for target group size should be based on thoughtful, academic return on investment calculations, calculating the cost per student served and student growth rates.

Once a district has selected direct service expectations, target group size (influenced by the service delivery model), and other criteria, determining how much staffing is needed in each school becomes data-driven, transparent, and equitable.

Reading support provides a good example of the value of creating staffing and workload guidelines. As districts across the country have focused on increasing reading proficiency, a common question is, “How many reading teachers are needed in each school?” Without clear guidelines, it is a very difficult question to answer definitively. By creating both direct service time and group size guidelines, it becomes a much easier question to answer. For example, if a district decides that reading teachers are expected to instruct students 20 hours a week (roughly 60% of the work week) and each reading group serves five students on average, then 6.3 FTE are required in a school with 250 struggling readers. No more, no less.

As the table below reveals, small changes in direct service or average group size have a big impact on staffing needs. Dropping the group size by a student or reducing the number of sessions taught by one day shifts staffing by 20% or 12% respectively (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4

NUMBER OF READING TEACHERS (FTEs) REQUIRED TO SUPPORT 250 STRUGGLING READERS*							
Direct Service Time Expectation		Target Group Size Options					
Hours Per Week	Sessions Per Day	3	4	5	6	7	8
12.5	5	16.7	12.5	10.0	8.3	7.1	6.3
15.0	6	13.9	10.4	8.3	6.9	6.0	5.2
17.5	7	11.9	8.9	7.1	6.0	5.1	4.5
20.0	8	10.4	7.8	6.3	5.2	4.5	3.9
22.5	9	9.3	6.9	5.6	4.6	4.0	3.5
25.0	10	8.3	6.3	5.0	4.2	3.6	3.1

*Assumes each struggling reader receives instruction 30 minutes a week, 5 times a week
Source: The District Management Council

The Nagging Question

“If managing remediation and intervention staff frees up funds by reducing overall staffing needs, will this hurt student outcomes?”

The answer to this question is a resounding “No!” If this is managed thoughtfully, it can, in fact, be an avenue to raising achievement.

Some of the savings come from increasing the amount of time each staff spends with students (especially in schools where direct service time has been low). This should help rather than harm student achievement.

Managing group size need not impact student achievement. By grouping students with similar needs, slightly larger groups can be equally effective. For example, some districts have moved from a “push in” model that created reading groups of three students whose only

commonality is their homeroom, to a “pull out” model that created groups of five students pulled from multiple rooms, but all having similar needs, e.g., decoding. As a result, instruction could be more targeted, which more than compensated for the slightly larger group size.

Finally, elevating the discussion and management of remediation and intervention efforts to district leaders often leads to a more robust review of service delivery models, academic return on investment, and teacher effectiveness. All this is not only good for the budget, but is also good for students.

Overcoming Pushback

The benefits of thoughtfully managing intervention staffing through guidelines are significant, often allowing for double-digit reductions in staff without reducing at all the amount of time each student is supported. But, managing staffing in this way is uncommon, and can feel unreasonable at first. Pushback often comes from staff on three fronts: 1) the concept is unrealistic, 2) the guidelines are unreasonable, and 3) the implementation is unfair.

“Every student is different” and “My work can’t be simply put into a chart” are common feelings. It helps when district and school leaders communicate that virtually all other teachers in the district do have very clearly defined expectations and that this effort only brings academic support staff onto the same system as general education staff.

Communicating that direct-service time and group-size targets create much greater equity for students and academic support staff offers a positive rationale for the change. Without clear guidelines, some staff are unintentionally being asked to work more hours and serve more students. In schools that are understaffed, some children are likely to get less support than similar students in other schools. Framing the targets as a new approach to the new normal can also resonate: given declining resources, the district must manage differently, and this change is prudent for tough times.

The loudest pushback can come when the guidelines are first established, especially the direct-service time guideline.

Teachers who spend as few as one of every three school hours with students can see themselves as working at capacity, even if many of their colleagues spend twice this amount of time with students. It turns out that these staff members generally attend various internal meetings and do not want to cut back on them, which is necessary to increase the time they spend serving students directly. By acknowledging the value of meetings, but clearly placing a high value on serving students, the principal and district leaders can communicate that meetings are important, but that decisions about who must attend, when they are held, and what their focus and structure are must be made with an eye to the need to have academic staff providing direct service to students for a substantial portion of their time in school. Their willingness to do so can be encouraged by reminding them that general education staff also want more time to meet, but that they, too, are provided only a fixed amount of time away from students.

The last hurdle to overcome is staff pushback regarding the reassignment process. New guidelines will lead to new staffing patterns. Schools with too many staff will have some of their staff moved to schools with too few. But, many staff feel very attached to their school, and view a transfer as unfair. Similarly, principals are not always pleased to lose staff who are part of the faculty “family” they have come to count on. Allowing principals and staff to have input into how but not whether transfer decisions will be made can help smooth the way.

GETTING STARTED

ADDING PRECISION TO REMEDIATION AND INTERVENTION STAFFING LEVELS:

Data-Driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload

Remediation and intervention staff, including special education, ELL, Title I teachers, and paraprofessionals, can account for a quarter to a third of total district spending on instructional salaries. Better managing remediation and intervention staffing by creating formal staffing and workload guidelines can free up millions of dollars without reducing service and support to students.

HERE'S HOW TO GET STARTED:

- 1 INVEST IN GATHERING THE RIGHT DATA**

When managing virtually all remediation and intervention roles, it is helpful to know two key data points: 1) The amount of time a staff member spends directly serving students, and 2) group size (essentially, class size). Most districts do not have these data readily available, but adopting the processes, systems, and tools to collect and analyze the data are well worth the effort.
- 2 BUILD A CROSS-FUNCTIONAL TEAM TO SET THE GUIDELINES**

Special education, ELL, and Title I leadership have little experience writing workload guidelines, and are naturally reluctant about changes that could mean more work or less staff. A team approach that is led at the deputy superintendent level and includes remediation and intervention department heads, the business office, and human resources, is often needed.
- 3 INCREASE STAFF TIME SPENT SERVING STUDENTS BY REDUCING TIME SPENT IN MEETINGS**

In many districts, meetings and paperwork can consume 50% or more of each day. Creating guidelines that reduce the number of meetings attended can free up time to serve students and can reduce staffing needs.
- 4 USE MULTIPLE CRITERIA TO DETERMINE TARGET GROUP SIZES**

Setting guidelines for target group sizes for special education and other interventions is not as straightforward as general education targets. Districts can use multiple criteria such as the age of the student, type of need, type of disability, and other criteria to create nuanced guidelines that are child-centered and cost-effective.
- 5 IF THE BUDGET ALLOWS, PHASE IN CHANGES THROUGH ATTRITION**

This phased approach can ease pushback and make staff more comfortable participating in the process of developing guidelines.

A word to the wise: KEEP THE CONVERSATION FOCUSED ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND EQUITY FOR STAFF AND STUDENTS

Any reductions to special education, ELL, or other remediation and support services can provoke stiff opposition. Communicate that thoughtful staffing guidelines can actually make staffing assignments more equitable without reducing any services to students. The district's message and actions must stay focused on helping students, staff, and the budget all at the same time.



DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

ADDING PRECISION TO REMEDIATION AND INTERVENTION STAFFING LEVELS: Data-driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload



DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®

Using data-driven guidelines to manage staffing of special education, ELL, Title I and reading teachers often presents an opportunity to improve student outcomes, increase equity between staff, bring transparency to often-debated central office decisions, and free up considerable resources for other strategic priorities. It is also not very common.

Lessons from the field

LESSON
1

Superintendent leadership is critical

LESSON
2

Focus equally on improving student achievement and increasing equity for staff and students

LESSON
3

Sharing good data eases the way

LESSON
4

Create formal written guidelines

LESSON
5

Minimize staff discomfort by offering control over most decisions

Implementation challenges such as pushback from teachers, lack of actionable data, and reluctance from department leaders often discourage school districts from tackling this opportunity, which can, in fact, be good for kids and good for the budget.

Changing special education, English Language Learners (ELL), and reading support is never easy given that these services impact some of the neediest children in the district. But big gains can be had, and, in most cases, a slight shift—not an overhaul, is all that is needed. It may mean new schedules and it may mean staff visit different schools, but by committing to help students, by ensuring that not one minute of support is reduced for even one student, and by engaging with staff throughout the process, positive change can be made.

LESSON

1

Superintendent leadership is critical

It might seem obvious that the assistant superintendent for special education or the ELL director should lead any effort to revamp remediation and intervention staffing and scheduling. This has not been the path to success in most districts, however. Only superintendents can provide the urgency, political cover, and clout needed to implement changes in such a sensitive and complex area.

There are too many divergent stakeholders for the leader of just one department to chair the effort. For example, when one district revised its staffing guidelines for special education teachers and speech and language therapists, the special education director, the speech and language director, special education teachers, therapists, principals, and parents were all active participants. Each had different concerns.

Since the district was experiencing dramatic budget cuts in general education, special education staff were naturally wary of creating guidelines that might lead to staff cuts. Staff anxiety quickly made its way to the speech and language director and the special education director. Principals were also protective of their staff, and feared any new guidelines would just be code for staff reductions, leaving schools unable to meet IEP requirements. Parents naturally were concerned that services would be cut. At the start, all but the superintendent wished the effort would fade away.

Despite the resistance, the superintendent championed the effort and held firm. Her resolve strengthened the special education director's commitment, which in turn buoyed the speech and language director and the parents. The superintendent assured the principals that the process would not leave schools understaffed, but actually would ensure appropriate support in each school.

In another district, a hands-on superintendent realized that it was her attitude of "We're going to do this" that was key to propelling this effort; the number of hours she spent on this effort was far less important. She inserted herself at just a few critical times, but did so with energy and determination. In all, she attended just four key meetings in the course of the school year. The initial meeting included special education administrators and about five teachers. Those at the first meeting became the scheduling guideline committee, a small group charged with analyzing data and creating guidelines that would best serve the students in the district. The

superintendent's presence at this kickoff meeting conveyed the importance of the effort and greatly empowered and energized the committee members.

The second meeting was an informational session with the principals. The superintendent's message was clear: "We want to be inclusive in the change, but change is coming." She attended two other key meetings with staff, reiterating her commitment to the change. These were not detailed working sessions, but created urgency and conveyed the certainty of change. Even though the director of special education had become the true champion of the work, only the superintendent could have maintained the momentum when the inevitable pushback arose.

Part of good leadership is knowing when to step away. For example, when all the speech therapists met to review draft guidelines, the superintendent was purposefully absent. This allowed for concerns, feedback, and pushback to be voiced freely. Knowing there was strong support from the superintendent, the special education director was able to navigate some tough conversations.

LESSON

2

Focus equally on improving student achievement and increasing equity for staff and students

No one wants to balance the budget on the backs of needy students. Any attempt to shift resources from special education, ELL, or other remediation and support services can seem harsh and can engender stiff opposition. The message and actions must stay focused on helping students, staff, and the budget all at the same time.

For example, one district made clear that the district's development of special education staffing guidelines would not take a single minute of service away from students. To expedite the process and dramatically reduce the pushback, he also declared that the district would not change the service delivery model either. The district would just apply data-driven staffing rules to current practices to

better manage current approaches. "We will serve students more efficiently, but not differently," he stipulated.

This was an important decision; a number of more radical redesigns had been considered, such as shifting from co-teaching to other less costly forms of academic support. He reasoned that a move away from co-teaching might free up more funds, but it was too much of an emotional shift. Holding service delivery constant at the start made it easier to bring an

The superintendent's message was clear: "We want to be inclusive in the change, but change is coming."

analytical approach to remediation and intervention staffing.

In another district, messaging included a tight linkage to the reality that state funding was being reduced dramatically and that services in general education were being cut. If special education services could be managed more efficiently without reducing services to special education students, then other services to students could be restored. This was about adding back in other places, not about taking away.

Stressing that the effort is more than just about efficiency helps win supporters. When a district discovered from detailed data analysis that workloads varied widely among staff, improving equity became important. While some staff spent close to 70% of their week serving students, others were spending just 30%. All realized that having guidelines would create equity and address the underlying resentment among those who had to work more than others. There is almost always a high desire to make things more fair; data-driven staffing guidelines are part of the solution.

Debunking the myth that changes in group size harm students is also important. Sharing hard data that shows many teachers in the district already have larger groups than others lessens the concerns among staff that any change will be unreasonable.

LESSON 3

Sharing good data eases the way

“This just isn’t possible. I’m already working at home and on weekends.” “My staff is already stretched too thin.” These are often the first comments uttered when discussing the concept of shifting resources by managing remediation and intervention staffing through guidelines.

For example, in a meeting with upward of 25 speech and language pathologists, staff shared that they were spending about 90% of their time with students and nothing more could

The need for faith and persistence

A hallmark of focusing on improving effectiveness and cost-effectiveness in remediation and intervention is that so many smart, committed people will say it cannot be done. The story of one mid-sized urban district highlights the need for both faith and persistence.

Facing a budget gap that exceeded \$50 million, the district decided no stone should remain unturned. A study a few years earlier indicated that compared to like-districts, it had 50% more related service providers (speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy). Dusting off the old report, the question was asked, “Is there an opportunity to provide all the same services at less expense?” “No,” said the assistant superintendent for special education. “It would be illegal!” he added. “No,” said the director of therapeutic services. “We are so understaffed that we have taken to using outside contractors to supplement district staff.” “No,” said the human resources director. “Our collective bargaining agreement places very tight limits

on staff caseload.” The deputy superintendent finally said, “They can’t all be wrong. They are much closer to the frontline reality than I am.”

It took faith in the benchmarking data to push back and ask again, “How is it that other districts are much more efficient?” “We are different from those other districts,” all replied with confidence.

Persistence trumped certainty. Despite the belief by many that it was a fool’s errand, the district collected paper schedules from every therapist in every school. The results surprised many. With just a few hours of analysis, it became clear that some therapists taught well below the collective bargaining minimums, which were quite conservative to begin with. Simply by assigning these underutilized staff to cover schools that needed extra help, the number of outside contractors could be reduced. A couple days of data collection and analysis revealed \$2 million in savings, which were realized the following year.

be squeezed from them. “Just look at my week and you will see!” This was not resistance to change; it was an honest, deep-seated belief. However, it was not true.

Notwithstanding the fact that the district had 1.4 times as many therapists as like districts, neither staff, principals nor many special education administrators believed gains could be had. It seemed very unlikely that a consultant’s report and a central office analysis could dislodge this misconception. The district decided to do exactly as the staff suggested and “look at their week.” Each staff member was asked to track his or her activities for a week, session by session, hour by hour, and submit the information. Only by going straight to the source, staff members themselves, would the data be believable.

An analysis of the data indicated that, on average, therapists were spending 32%, not 90%, of their time with students. When discussing guidelines for how much time a therapist should spend with students, some staff and administrators quickly concluded that if current practice was indeed that just a third of the week was spent with students, then that must be reasonable. District leaders reached out to another district to benchmark and calibrate their practices. The other district, which was very similar, had also collected schedules from their staff. In that district, therapists were spending 55% of their time with students; that district was seeking to increase this to 65%, and eventually up to 75%. The misconception that 32% was the maximum possible began to erode.

During the rollout of new staffing guidelines, continuing to share data can be valuable. During the first week of a new school year with new schedules and fewer staff (but no change in services to students), screams of angst were erupting. The new workload is “impossible, overwhelming, and unsustainable.” While wanting not to backtrack, but also wanting to be responsive, one district chose not to engage in a theoretical discussion of “too much” versus “just enough.” The district again turned to sharing hard data. Staff once again submitted their actual new schedules to district leaders. On average, staff had only increased their time with students by less than 2 hours a week, well below the district targets. It just felt like much more.

**LESSON
4**

Create formal written guidelines

Specificity helps create clarity and transparency. In general education, workload and other guidelines are typically clear and unambiguous. A district’s target first grade class size might be 25 students, not “around 20 to low 30s.” Remediation and intervention staff often have much less precise expectations on their time.

Administrators at first often doubt that precision is possible. The students served are different, with different IEPs, and

different needs and intensity of support. The most common pushback is “one child doesn’t equal another child,” so precision isn’t possible. The students are different, but expectations for adults need not be.

The guideline writing committees quickly learn that they cannot reasonably target how many students each staff member should support, but they can set guidelines about many other aspects.

One committee was able to quickly develop direct service and grouping guidelines. The staff themselves helped establish how much time a therapist should spend in direct service with students on a weekly basis, and how many students could be grouped together. They also set a much more nuanced grouping policy, varying it based on the type of need and the age of the students; they also limited groups to similar aged students, with larger age ranges at the higher grades. Having front-line staff help craft the guidelines brought needed expertise to the table and minimized criticism. Finalizing the direct service expectations, however, did require direct involvement of the superintendent, as it is difficult for staff to set their own workload.

The guideline committee also used both internal and external benchmarks in setting guidelines. An internal benchmark looks at what each district staff member is already doing. For a teacher currently working with children just a third of the week, spending 65% of the week with students might seem “impossible” until they realize that many others in the district are already doing exactly this. External benchmarks can also be a game changer in redefining what is reasonable.

There is no wrong or right set of guidelines, since each district has a unique context, culture, and community expectations, but being specific increases efficiency, equity, and transparency.

**LESSON
5**

Minimize staff discomfort by offering control over most decisions

Districts often wrestle with how fast to implement changes in staffing based on their newly developed guidelines. A “rip the Band-Aid off fast” strategy of implementing the guidelines in one fell swoop can likely create enough pushback from staff that the whole effort could be scuttled.

Since setting guidelines often leads to fewer staff and staff being assigned to different schools, implementing data-driven staffing guidelines can be very unsettling to teachers, even if there is no impact on students. Based on conversations with staff, it has become clear that there are a number of issues important to them, but not critical to the district:

- Allowing staff to remain teaching at their current level – elementary, middle, or high school – was very

important, even if they are technically able to work at any level.

- Allowing staff to prioritize which schools they work in was very important.
- Limiting the number of schools supported by one person was also appreciated.
- Since increasing direct service with students means reducing hours in meetings, allowing staff to have input as to which meetings they attend made it easier to accept going to fewer meetings. For example, in one district, staff greatly valued attending meetings 3½ days out of five. It was a mistake to have assumed that the district was “freeing” them from attending all these meetings.

These and other decisions impacted where staff worked, but not how many staff worked. They are budget neutral. Allowing staff to have significant impact on these decisions eased the pushback. For example, some districts provided draft schedules to staff to get their feedback and allowed many modifications, as long as they did not increase staffing or decrease service to students. The results can be surprising. In one district, for example, many staff opted for less equity (having more or less time with students than their colleagues) in exchange for not having to share a school with other therapists.

Getting staff feedback is helpful, but not always fun. Often the meetings can feel like “gripe sessions,” with questions as to

why any changes are needed. However, giving staff a forum to vent and to identify areas to be tweaked actually eases the process. Staff want to be heard, but strong leadership is needed to stay the course.

The most challenging question is how quickly to reduce staffing when reductions are warranted based on student needs and the new guidelines. Most districts phased in many of the changes through attrition. As teachers retired or moved away, the staffing guidelines determined whether the positions would be replaced. Often, districts decided to reach their targets over a roughly three-year period.

If the district can and will phase in the changes via attrition, it helps to state this approach upfront. Job security is obviously a top concern, and addressing this issue early helped staff participate in the plan-

ning since they knew they would not be working a colleague or themselves out of a job.

Leadership and good listening

Better managing remediation and intervention services is possible. A strong superintendent, armed with good data and bolstered by strong resolve, needs to listen to staff concerns and to make accommodation when possible, but needs to hold firm on a few key decisions. Students will continue to be well served, staff will benefit from more equitable distribution of work, and the budget will come out ahead.

The students are different, but expectations for adults need not be.



SPENDING MONEY WISELY

Getting the Most from School District Budgets

This chapter is from *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* by Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, and Claire Sullivan of The District Management Council. To access this chapter and the rest of the series, please go to www.dmcouncil.org. Topics in this series include:

1. **Calculating Academic Return on Investment: A Powerful Tool and a Great Investment**
2. **Managing to Existing Class-Size Targets: Systems and Tools to Staff More Closely to Current Policy**
3. **Adding Precision to Remediation and Intervention Staffing Levels: Data-Driven Guidelines Improve Schedules, Building Assignments, and Workload**
4. **Finding Politically Acceptable Ways to Increase Class Size or Teaching Load: Freeing up Funds for Strategic Priorities**
5. **Strategically Spending Federal Entitlement Grants: Making the Connection to District Priorities**
6. **Ensuring More Students Read on Grade Level: Cost-Effective Strategies**
7. **Improving the Cost-Effectiveness of Professional Development: Reducing Expenses While Increasing Impact**
8. **Rethinking Purchasing: A Strategic Approach to Increasing the Value of Each Dollar Spent**
9. **Lowering the Cost of Extended Learning Time: Creating Financial Sustainability**
10. **Targeting New Investments: Funding a Better Future Despite Declining Resources**

About the Authors

Nathan Levenson is Senior Managing Director of The District Management Council (DMC). After a career in the private sector and six years as an elected school board member, he served as superintendent in Arlington, Massachusetts. His work at DMC has led him to more than 50 districts, always looking to help them do more with less.

James C. Smith, Senior Director at The District Management Council, has a combination of human capital consulting and classroom teaching experience. James works on projects across several areas including human capital, strategic planning, special education, and stakeholder engagement.

Karla Baehr is Senior Advisor and Consultant at The District Management Council. Her many years of experience as a superintendent in both urban and affluent districts provide a unique perspective. Karla also served as deputy commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Claire Sullivan is a Senior Associate at The District Management Council. Having worked in the classroom prior to joining DMC, Claire now works with a number of districts on mapping resource allocation, with particular focus on data-driven budgeting and improving special education and remediation and intervention staffing.

About the District Management Council

The District Management Council (DMC) partners with public school district leaders to help improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation. DMC was founded in 2004 to address the most pressing and important management challenges facing American educators. The trusted advisor to school district leaders, DMC works with districts on these important issues to achieve measurable results. With the firm belief that leadership and management matter, DMC helps to strengthen and increase the managerial capacity of the people leading school districts to systemically improve the performance of the American public education system. To learn more, visit www.dmcouncil.org.

Support for this series was provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL®