

**SUNSET RIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT 29  
525 SUNSET RIDGE RD  
NORTHFIELD, IL 60093**

**Education Committee Meeting:**

**Tuesday, March 9, 2021 – 6:00 p.m. at Sunset Ridge School  
(525 Sunset Ridge Road, Northfield, IL. 60093)**



## SUNSET RIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT 29

525 Sunset Ridge Road • Northfield, Illinois • 60093

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*Cultivating a learning community that engages the hearts and minds of students, one child at a time*

**BOARD OF EDUCATION  
SUNSET RIDGE SCHOOL DISTRICT 29  
525 SUNSET RIDGE ROAD  
NORTHFIELD, ILLINOIS 60093  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE MEETING  
MARCH 9, 2021  
6:00 p.m.**

The Education Committee meeting will include an opportunity for public comment. Any member of the public that would like to make a public comment, can appear in-person or submit comments via email to [D29\\_board@sunsetridge29.org](mailto:D29_board@sunsetridge29.org) by 3:55 PM on MARCH 9, 2021

Public comments submitted via email will be announced during the public comment portion of the meeting. Please note the duration of public comment is limited and the Board does not respond to public comments.

A live stream feed of the Education Committee meeting can be viewed at [https://www.sunsetridge29.org/board\\_of\\_education/livestream](https://www.sunsetridge29.org/board_of_education/livestream).

### **AGENDA**

1. ROLL CALL
2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES  
2.1 Minutes from December 8, 2020 Meeting
3. PUBLIC COMMENT
4. REPORTS  
4.1 Special Education Audit
5. NEXT MEETING: May 11, 2021
6. ADJOURNMENT:

**BOARD OF EDUCATION  
525 SUNSET RIDGE ROAD  
NORTHFIELD, ILLINOIS 60093  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE MEETING  
DECEMBER 8, 2020  
6:00 p.m.**

**MINUTES**

**ROLL CALL: (6:00) p.m.**

Mrs. Peterson called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and upon roll call, the following were present:

Present: Mrs. Detlefsen, Mr. Hayes, Mrs. Peterson  
Absent: None  
Also Present: Ms. Alpert Knight, Mr. Welch, Mr. Subeck,  
Mr. Hayes, Mrs. Detlefsen, Mr. Spaan, Mrs. Dunham, Dr.  
Sukenik, Mrs. Kiedaisch, Dr. Stange

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES:**

**2.1 Education Committee Meeting – November 10, 2020**

Mr. Hayes moved to approve the minutes from November 10, 2020 and Mrs. Detlefsen seconded the motion. All were in favor.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

There was no public comment.

**REPORTS:**

**4.1 Curriculum Review Planning Cycle**

Dr. Stange, Mrs. Kiedaisch, Dr. Sukenik, and Mrs. Dunham each provided updates regarding the evolution of the Hybrid Remote/In-Person learning program, highlighted lessons learned, stakeholder input that was gathered, and process and systems that were modified.

Board members asked questions about the mental health needs of students, special education needs, and services for students in the Alternate Remote Learning program.

**ADJOURNMENT:**

Mrs. Detlefsen motioned to adjourn the meeting at 6:51 p.m. and Mr. Hayes seconded the motion. All were in favor.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson, Education Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Secretary, Board of Education

Approved \_\_\_\_\_, 2021



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**2020-2021  
SPECIAL EDUCATION REPORT**

***A Report to the Education Committee  
of the  
Sunset Ridge School District #29 Board of Education***

### **Executive Summary**

The Student Services Department is comprised of an array of educational and mental/physical health services designed to complement the general education program in addressing the unique learning needs of particular students. The Department includes staff related to Special Education and English Language Learner services. However, for the purposes of this report, the Special Education program will be the focus. Significant substantive and procedural guidance on the organization, operation, and daily functioning of these services is provided through the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) Administrative Code, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA Section 504), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), formerly the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Certified Special Education staff includes eight Student Services Teachers, a Counselor, a Psychologist, a Behavior Interventionist, and two Speech Pathologists. Non-certified staff includes Teaching Assistants as well as a Psychologist Intern. Additionally, the district contracts services through NSSED (occupational therapy, physical therapy, and psychological services) and NSSEO (hearing itinerant).

Currently there are 81 RESIDENT Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students that are receiving special education services. This represents 17.2 percent of the total K-8 student population. These students are served at Middlefork and Sunset Ridge Schools, or receive services from attendance at one of the Northern Suburban Special Education District's programs or other private programs.

The provision of Student Services supports represents a high proportion (approximately 27 percent) of the District's operating budget. The majority of costs incurred are in Personne/Benefits and Tuition for Outplacements (District 29 students that attend schools other than Middlefork or Sunset Ridge because of their high special education needs, including the students in the NSSED Structured Learning Environment (SLE) program housed at Middlefork School).

The last section of this report details the Special Education Systems Assessment. This assessment was a collaboration between District 29 and NSSED; the purpose of which was to highlight both the strengths and areas for growth in the district's educational programming. There were many positive findings, particularly regarding special education programming. Recommendations for district-wide growth target capacity building across general education and special education, with the maximum amount of inclusion of students with complex needs as the goal. Increasing this philosophical understanding and district practices will make an excellent educational system even better.

## **SECTION I: District 29 Special Education Services (and Section 504 Plan Monitoring)**

Within the Student Services Department, special education or 504 plan eligibility is viewed as one part of a continuum of services and options available to support students in need. Our goal is to strengthen the general education system by providing a supportive array of interventions, disseminated through a problem solving process, and continuously evaluated through data-based decision making. Special education services comprise the largest component of the Student Services Department. By both federal and state mandate, public schools must identify and provide special education services for students with disabilities, beginning at age 3 years until the child's 22nd birthday. These services include a diverse array of academic, cognitive, social, emotional, communication, motor, and health assessments and interventions.

There are two types of legally binding educational plans which can be developed and implemented by public schools to support students with disabilities. Students with disabilities that impact a major life function may qualify for reasonable accommodations, under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This is commonly referred to as a 504 Plan. The plan identifies the student's disability and the corresponding reasonable accommodations. A 504 Plan should be updated annually, and is subject to re-evaluation for eligibility every three years.

Services for students with disabilities requiring specialized instructional services (beyond accommodations) are governed by IDEA via the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). Currently, ISBE identifies 14 categories for special education eligibility under IDEA. Regardless of the category under which eligibility is sought, a student must both a) show evidence of the disability and, b) show evidence of educational impact. Those disability categories are: Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disability, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech/Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visual Impairment.

In brief, the IDEA eligibility process is more involved than that required under Section 504. Instructional services, goals, and accommodation under the IDEA are delineated in a plan called an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a legal document which describes the student's disability, instructional supports/accommodations, goals, related services, and other relevant educational programming information. IEPs are reviewed annually and students must be reevaluated for special education eligibility every three years.

### **Middlefork School Special Education Instruction Services:**

At Middlefork School, three full-time certified special education teachers, with support from eight special education teaching assistants and in collaboration with our general education staff, provide assessment, remedial instruction, pre-teaching, direct instruction, co-teaching,

curriculum modification, curricular/instructional differentiation support, emotional/behavioral support, and case management services. Every effort is made to provide special education resource services in the general education classroom (Least Restrictive Environment). In addition to providing special education instruction, student services teachers ensure the provision of appropriate accommodations and modifications for students that qualify for either special education or 504 Plans. There is a strong focus at Middlefork School on providing early intervention to students identified as “at risk” based on academic assessments (AIMSweb, Measures of Academic Progress). This early intervention instruction is primarily provided in early literacy and math skills by our special education teachers. Last year, FY20, NSSD began renting a space at Middlefork to house the SLE program. This current school year, FY21, there are three district students and one student from a neighboring district that participate in this program. As with all of the special education services, the goal is always to include students in the general education classroom as much as is possible and beneficial to the student.

#### **Sunset Ridge School Special Education Instruction Services:**

At Sunset Ridge School, five full-time certified special education teachers, with support from 11 special education teaching assistants and in collaboration with our general education staff, provide assessment, remedial instruction, pre-teaching, direct instruction, co-teaching, curriculum modification, curricular/instructional differentiation support, emotional/behavioral support, and case management services. Every effort is made to provide special education resource services in the general education classroom (i.e., Least Restrictive Environment). In addition to providing direct special education instruction, student services teachers ensure the provision of appropriate accommodations and modifications for students that qualify for either special education or 504 plans.

#### **District-Wide Special Education Services:**

##### School Counseling, Psychology and Behavior Interventions

Social, emotional, and behavioral supports are available to students demonstrating needs in these areas. Services include direct skill instruction, assessment, counseling, resource linkages, designing and implementing behavior intervention plans and case management. Sunset Ridge School District 29 currently employs one school counselor, one behavior specialist, one school psychologist, one school psychologist intern and contracts a psychologist for two days per week from NSSD. This team supports students’ social and emotional needs in the areas of social skills, anxiety, depression, emotional regulation, anger management, frustration tolerance, problem solving skills, school phobia, stress management, and crisis intervention. The counselor and psychologists typically meet with students individually or in small groups. Further, they provide classroom support through consultation or whole group instruction via our Social Emotional Learning Curriculum (e.g., Character Education at Middlefork School). The counselor, behavior interventionist and psychologists are also a crucial part of our Problem-Solving Teams, along with administrators, teachers, and speech and language pathologists, who

collaborate to develop interventions to meet individual student's educational needs in the areas of academics and social or emotional skills. Recent trends in mental health have required the increased provision in the following areas: delivering Erin's Law lessons (child-focused sexual abuse prevention education) across all grade levels, Signs of Suicide in 8th grade, Erika's Lighthouse depression awareness program in 7th grade, and crisis management for a growing number of students exhibiting suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression and struggles associated with gender identity and sexuality, in addition to coping with the impacts of the global COVID pandemic. Commonly, these students are not students in special education already seen by the district mental health providers.

#### Speech & Language Pathology

District 29 provides services for students with speech and or language impairments. Services include individual and small group speech therapy, inclusion supports, and case management services. These staff members also team with the mental health staff to provide social and pragmatic language services. Sunset Ridge School District currently employs two full time Speech and Language Pathologists. One works with Sunset Ridge students, preschool students and private school students. The other works with Middlefork students. Both are also participants in our Problem-Solving Teams.

#### **Out of District Services:**

##### The Northern Suburban Special Education District

Sunset Ridge District is a member of the Northern Suburban Special Education District (NSSED). NSSED is a special education cooperative agreement between several north shore school Districts. Participation in NSSED provides Sunset Ridge faculty, staff, students, and parents with a variety of supports and services for students with special education needs including:

##### Staff Development

- Best Practices in Curriculum & Instruction
- Assessment and Intervention
- Supervision & Leadership
- Parenting and At-Home Intervention

##### Special Education Placements

- Early Childhood Program: Half and Full-day programs for children ages 3-5 years with significant disabilities
- Structured Learning Environment (previously Educational & Life Skills) Program: A comprehensive program for school-aged children with significant disabilities
- North Shore Academy: A day treatment program for students with emotional & behavioral disabilities

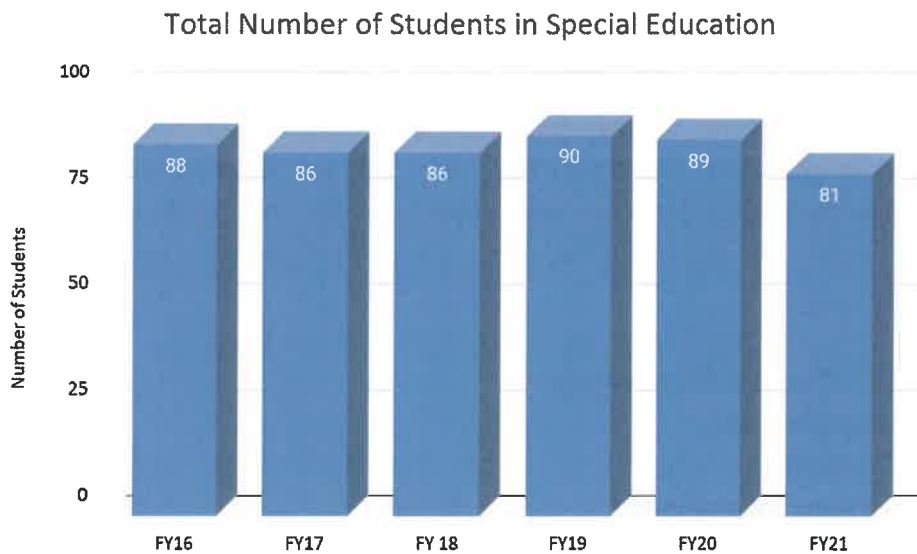


### Specialized Support Services

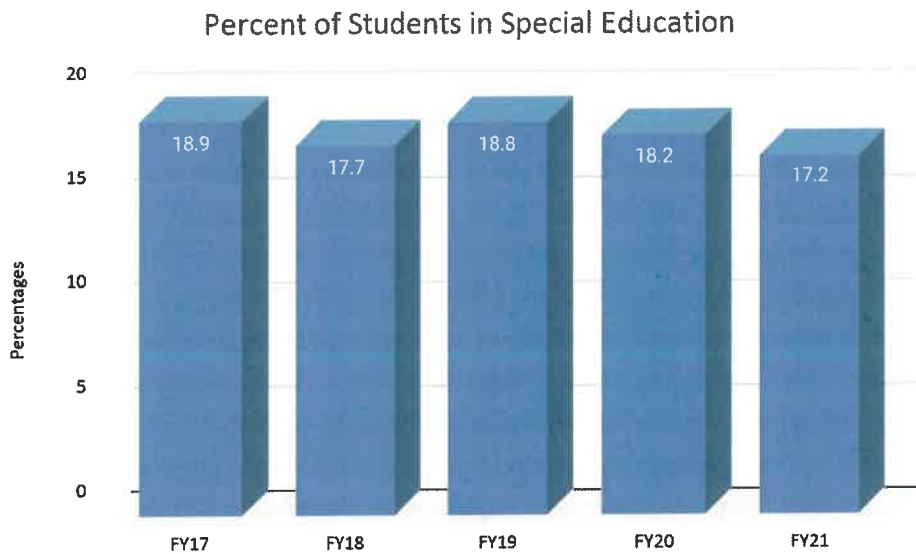
- Inclusion Consultation for children with disabilities placed in regular community preschools
- Vision Services
- Occupational & Physical Therapy Services
- Behavioral & Inclusion Consultation and Coaching

Currently there are 81 RESIDENT Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students that are receiving special education services. This represents 17.2 percent of the total K-8 student population. These students are served at Middlefork and Sunset Ridge Schools, or receive services from attendance at one of the Northern Suburban Special Education District's programs or other private programs. See Charts 1 through 3 for information about the number and percentage of students receiving special education services in District 29, as well as a comparison of the percent of students receiving special education services across the state and NSSED member districts for comparison purposes.

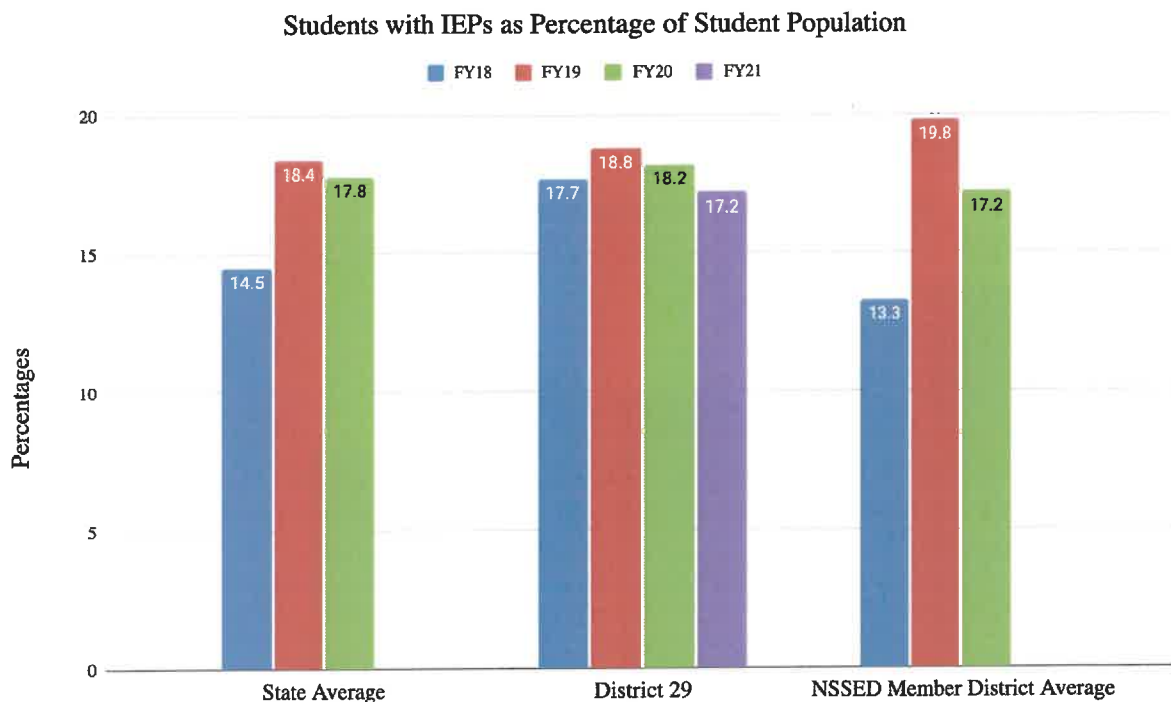
**Chart 1. Total Number of D29 RESIDENT Students Receiving Special Education Services**



**Chart 2. Total Percent of D29 RESIDENT Students Receiving Special Education Services**



**Chart 3. Total Percent of Students Receiving Special Education Services Across the State, NSSED Member Districts and D29**

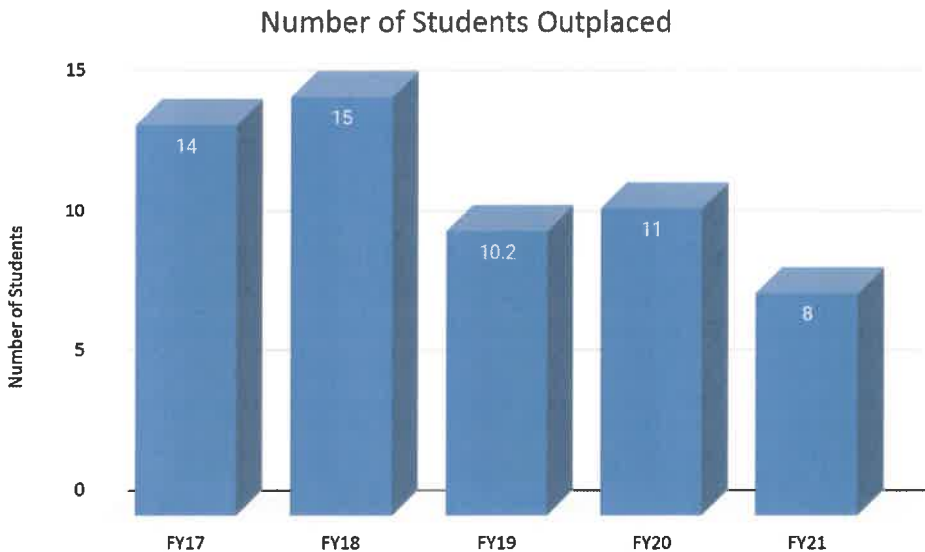


In District 29, of the identified special education disabilities, those related to communication impairments have historically been, and continue to be, the most prominent disability. Other

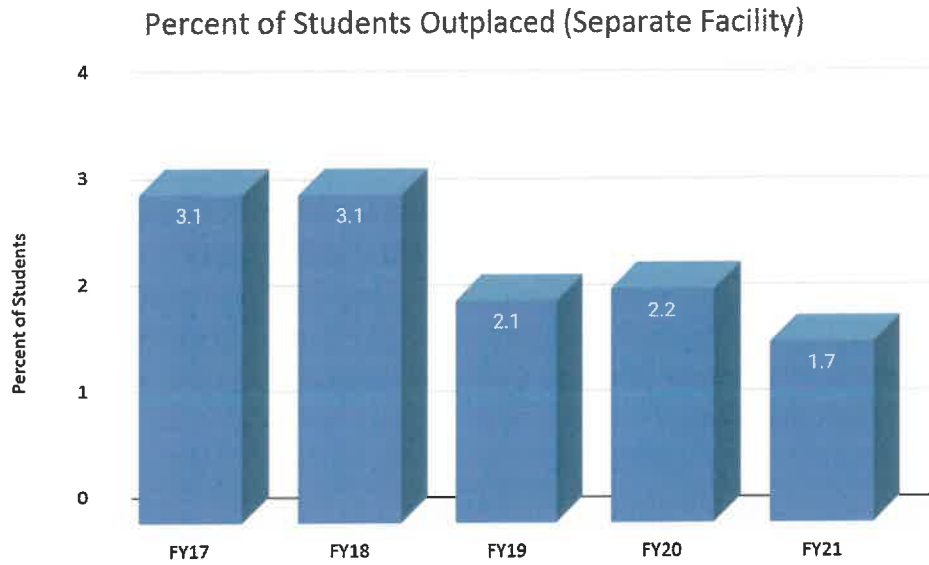
predominant categories included health-related impairments (including ADHD), emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, developmental delays and autism. Trend data indicates an increasing number of students with emotional disabilities and autism. Trends for other disabilities are stable or decreasing.

Chart 4 reflects the number of RESIDENT students with special education eligibility that were served outside of the District. Chart 5 depicts the percent of RESIDENT students served outside of the District. Due to the intense level of special education programming required for these students, they attended classes through the Northern Suburban Special Education District’s (NSSED) Early Childhood Program, Structured Learning Program or North Shore Academy Program, which services students with emotional needs, or through local private special education schools (e.g., Hyde Park Day School, New Hope Academy). Approximately 2.2 percent of the District’s population required out-of-District placements during FY20, and 2.1 percent in FY19. Thus far in FY21 approximately 1.7 percent of the District’s population requires out-of-District placements. This decrease was impacted by the addition of the NSSED SLE program at Middlefork in which D29 students are included with their Northfield peers to the greatest extent possible. Each out-of-District placement has an approximate cost of \$70,000/yr. and there is little financial reimbursement from ISBE for these costs, with the exception of residential placements. Most state aid in this domain relates to partial reimbursement of transportation costs. Chart 6 provides a comparison of the percent of students receiving special education services Out-of-District in separate facilities across the state and NSSED member districts for comparison purposes.

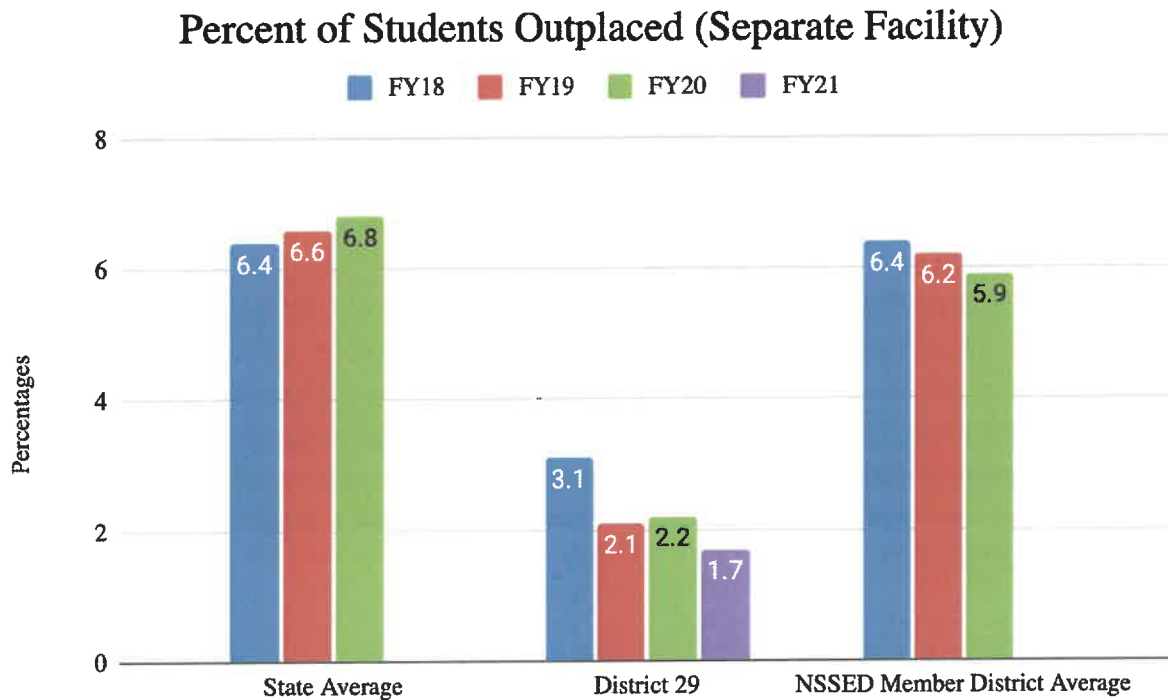
**Chart 4. Total Number of D29 RESIDENT Out-of-District Placements**



**Chart 5. Total Percent of D29 RESIDENT Out-of-District Placements**



**Chart 6. Total Percent of Out-of-Districts Placements Across the State, NSSED Member Districts and D29**



Parentally Placed Students in Private School Settings

Public schools in Illinois must also provide a variety of special education services to NON-RESIDENT students that attend private schools within the Sunset Ridge District 29 boundary. Initially, District 29 is responsible for conducting “Child Find”, the process of completing a comprehensive evaluation to determine special education eligibility. It is estimated that between meetings, direct observations, individually administered assessments and report writing, each evaluation has a cost to the District of approximately \$2,000. These services must be funded 100 percent through local funds and no federal or state reimbursement is provided. Historically the District has needed to contract staff from NSSD to help meet the requirements to evaluate students in the private schools. Beyond evaluation, the District is required to share a portion of the grant funds received with private or parochial schools within our District boundaries to provide direct services. District 29 typically provides speech and language services at Christian Heritage Academy to fulfill this obligation.

## **SECTION II: Response to Intervention Services and Multi-Tiered System of Supports**

As noted previously, District 29 provides a continuum of instruction that ranges in intensity across academic subject areas. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is utilized for all students, even those not in evaluation for, or currently receiving, special education services in the areas of academics, language development or social emotional skill development. (See the pictorial representation below.) The District has utilized such a format for many years, previously referred to as Flexible Service Delivery. A majority of students receive instructional interventions from their classroom teacher in the general education setting. Students requiring more intensive interventions are often grouped together for additional academic, language or social skill/emotional regulation instruction, or reinforcement, typically provided by student services personnel. Classroom teachers and student services personnel meet periodically to review assessment data and student progress to make decisions regarding the level of services needed. Further, Sunset Ridge School District utilizes a Response to Intervention (RtI) approach to evaluate student needs and special education eligibility. This process includes a series of progressively more intensive intervention and progress monitoring systems designed to match student needs to appropriate services. RtI consists of three essential components: providing high quality, research-based instruction/intervention matched to student needs; using data to monitor learning rate over time; and making educational decisions based upon student’s response to that instruction/intervention.

This MTSS framework, visually depicted in Chart 7 will be referenced in SECTION IV regarding the Special Education Systems Assessment conducted in FY20-FY21.

### **Chart 7. Multi-Tiered System of Supports Graphic**

# Multi-Tiered System of Supports

## ACADEMIC SYSTEMS

### Tier 3 Intensive, Individual Interventions

- Individual Students
- Assessment - based
- High intensity
- Of longer duration

### Tier 2 Targeted Group Interventions

- Some students (at-risk)
- High efficiency
- Rapid response

### Tier 1 Core Instructional Interventions

- All students:
- General Education Instruction
- Preventive, proactive

## BEHAVIORAL (Social/Emotional) SYSTEMS

### Tier 3 Intensive, Individual Interventions

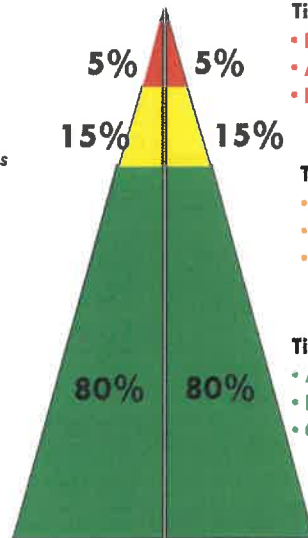
- Individual Students
- Assessment - based
- Intense, durable procedures

### Tier 2 Targeted Group Interventions

- Some students (at-risk)
- High efficiency
- Rapid response

### Tier 1 Core Instructional Interventions

- All settings, All students
- Preventive, proactive
- General Education



STUDENTS

## SECTION III: Student Services Staffing

Chart 8 reflects the Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) of the staff that provide student services. The level of staffing (both certified and noncertified) is determined annually via a review of quantitative data collected from eligibility and annual review meetings, District assessments (e.g., MAP testing, Curriculum-Based Measurements via AIMSweb), and consideration of the unique dynamics of particular student cohorts.

Governing the level of student services staffing is the formal District 29 Special Education Workload Agreement summarized in Chart 9. This agreement is required by all Illinois public schools to ensure adequate levels of student services staff to address student needs. Guidelines for staffing are based on 'Minutes Per Week' (MPW) of direct services attributed to eligible students, which are calculated annually. The ISBE currently requires this document to demonstrate a proportional amount of time for meeting, paperwork, consultation, and direct service minutes.

**Chart 8. Student Services Staffing FTE (BOLD denotes Certified Staff)**

	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21
<b>Special Education Teachers</b>	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0	8.0
<b>Extended Resource Teacher-Academic</b>	1.0	-	-	-	-
<b>Extended Resource Teacher-Behavior Interventionist</b>	-	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
<b>Teaching Assistants (Special Education)</b>	13.5	14.5	15.5	16.0	19.0
<b>Counselor</b>	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
<b>Psychologists</b>	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.4	1.4
<b>Psychologist Intern</b>	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
<b>Speech and Language Pathologist</b>	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
<b>English Language Learner Teacher</b>	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
<b>Teaching Assistant (General Education/ELL/Advanced Learning)</b>	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0

**Chart 9. Student Services Workload Agreement**

Component	Teacher	Aide	Psych	Soc	Speech
Lunch	210	210	210	210	210
Prep-Paperwork	240	210	240	240	240
Prep-Consultation	240	0	240	240	240
Prep-Meeting	180	0	180	180	180
Direct Service	1350	1820	1350	1350	1350
Total MPW	2220	2240	2220	2220	2220

### **SECTION III. General Revenue and Expenditures**

While most funding for District 29 programs and services is acquired from local property tax revenue, some federal and state assistance is available through grants. Chart 10 depicts this funding acquired. Funding sources include two grants: the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) grant and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), previously No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Title Grants. Both grants require annual application and considerable procedural and fiscal compliance monitoring via the ISBE. While both revenue sources reflect a slight increase in funding in recent years, these funds are grossly insufficient to cover the costs associated with the provision of mandated special education services. Further, the district is required to share a portion of our grant monies with the private and parochial schools within the District 29 boundaries. These funds are directly removed from the District 29 budget. Furthermore, these funds support the implementation of special education services for NON-RESIDENT students, while the ISBE has failed to provide sufficient funding to address the needs of RESIDENT students.

Additional funding, often referred to as state categoricals, is also reflected in Chart 10 and received by the District for reimbursement of personnel costs, out-of-District placements, special education transportation costs, summer school special education services, and general reimbursement based on the number of students with disabilities.

**Chart 10. Special Education Federal and State Funding**

	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY2018</b>	<b>FY2019</b>	<b>FY2020</b>
<b><i>IDEA Grant</i></b>	\$112,878	\$108,988	\$114,078	\$167,590
<b><i>Title I Grant</i></b>	\$72,822	\$69,216	\$82,119	\$73,127
<b><i>Title II Grant</i></b>	\$18,610	\$17,380	\$5,613	\$14,627
<b><i>Title IV Grant</i></b>	\$0	\$0	\$771	\$9,774
<b><i>State Categoricals</i></b>	\$364,221	\$450,672	\$408,207	\$473,537
<b>TOTAL REVENUE</b>	<b>\$455,653</b>	<b>\$537,268</b>	<b>\$496,710</b>	<b>\$571,065</b>

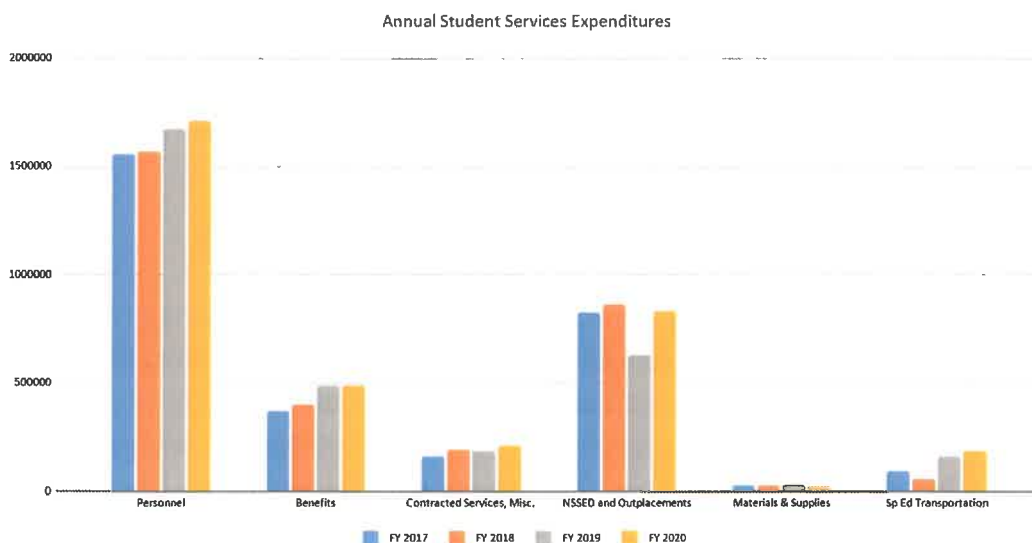
The aggregate (projected) cost of providing all student services in the District during FY20 was \$3.44M (see Chart 11). This amount represents all costs related to special education, ELL services, MTSS and RtI services; including administration, certified and non-certified staff salaries/benefits, out-of-district placements, supplies, professional development, and private school obligations. The cost was approximately 27 percent of the total (projected) District budget for FY20.

As expected, personnel and benefit costs account for the largest portion (approximately 64 percent) of the student services budget. Costs associated with out-of-District placements accounted for the next largest component (24 percent) of the student services budget. One out-of-District placement can cost between \$60,000-\$140,000/annually, based on the type of placement and level of support services required. Continuing to explore alternatives to reduce out-of-district placements is essential to containing special education costs. Special education transportation costs have increased since FY18. This is a result of an increase in the number of outplaced students being transported as well as renegotiated contracts with the transportation companies. Additionally, in FY20 one of the students was transported to multiple placements.

**Chart 11. Annual Student Services Expenditures**



	<b>FY 2017</b>	<b>FY 2018</b>	<b>FY 2019</b>	<b>FY 2020</b>
Personnel	\$1,558,048	\$1,567,848	\$1,675,920	1,710,555
Benefits	\$ 374,109	\$ 400,633	\$ 485,678	490,913
Contracted Services, Misc.	\$ 164,428	\$ 189,838	\$ 185,619	211,772
NSSED and Outplacements	\$ 828,531	\$ 861,683	\$ 630,688	830,067
Materials & Supplies	\$ 24,954	\$ 25,444	\$ 26,748	18,118
Sp Ed Transportation	\$ 93,463	\$ 59,438	\$ 163,546	188,470
	<b>\$3,043,533</b>	<b>\$3,104,884</b>	<b>\$3,168,199</b>	<b>\$3,449,895</b>
		2.02%	2.04%	8.89%



#### **SECTION IV. Special Education Systems Assessment FY20-FY21**

Within the context of the strategic plan, the following goal and objectives apply directly to the special education program.

##### **Meeting Needs of Learners:**

**GOAL AREA** - Sustain a learning environment that supports the unique strengths and evolving needs of individual students.

##### **OBJECTIVES:**

- Monitor and assess the effectiveness of the continuum of support services provided to diverse learners at both ends of the learning continuum, and make recommendations for improvement and enhancement.
- Continue the commitment to differentiation as essential to meeting the needs of all learners, one child at a time, through professional development and on-going assessment of instructional effectiveness.

To address these objectives, the district embarked on an assessment of the programming including a Systems Assessment through NSSD. Details of the System Assessment follow.

### **NSSD Systems Assessment Tool Description**

This evaluation is premised on over 50 years of best practices in the field of special education. Since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, then called Public Law 94-142, the emphasis for the programming of students with disabilities has been to receive services in their Least Restrictive Environment to the greatest extent appropriate and to “end the long history of segregation and exclusion of children with disabilities from the American public school system, and made a promise that every eligible child regardless of the nature or severity of the child’s disability, could go to school and learn alongside their peers” (IDEA Series: The Segregation of Students with Disabilities, National Council on Disability, February 7, 2018, pg 8 & 13). “Students with disabilities, including those with the greatest support needs, should have access to highly qualified general education through the use of supplementary aids and services and other related services and supports before making any placement decisions” (Kurth et. al, 2019). As such, a unified system of services and supports between general and special education must be integrated and comprehensive. Failure to do so perpetuates a system of practices that are now connected to low achievement scores and gaps in learning (Frattura & Capper, 2009).

### **Components:**

- **Quantitative Data:**

Illinois State Report Card Data and Federal Special Education Indicators

- **Equity Audit:**

Capper and Frattura, University Of Wisconsin Madison, [www.icsequity.org](http://www.icsequity.org)

- **Self- Assessment Tool:**

This component engages district personnel in a self-assessment of special education best practices. This tool, developed by the Center on School Turnaround (2017), provides many areas of best special education practices and a rubric for each strategy in which the district can gauge their level of implementation. The tool includes the following categories:

- Staff Qualifications and Expertise
- Education Opportunities and Learning Environment
- Effective Education Practices
- Teamwork and Collaboration
- School and Community Partnerships

- **Strengths and Areas of Growth:**

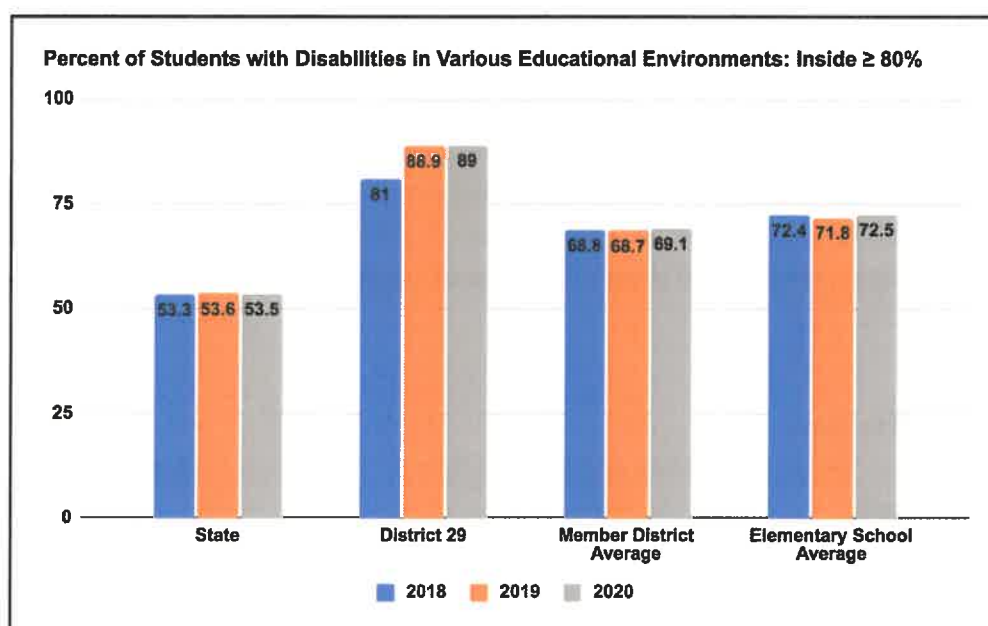
Determined collaboratively with NSSD and Sunset Ridge School District Administrators based upon data collected.

## Discussion of Systems Assessment Results

A number of areas of *strength and celebrations* emerged from the data analysis, classroom observations, and staff feedback, which was garnered through interviews and survey responses.

The district evidenced strong Least Restrictive Environment Data, indicating that a large majority of our students are educated within the general education environment for 80 percent or more of their school day, as indicated in Chart 12 below.

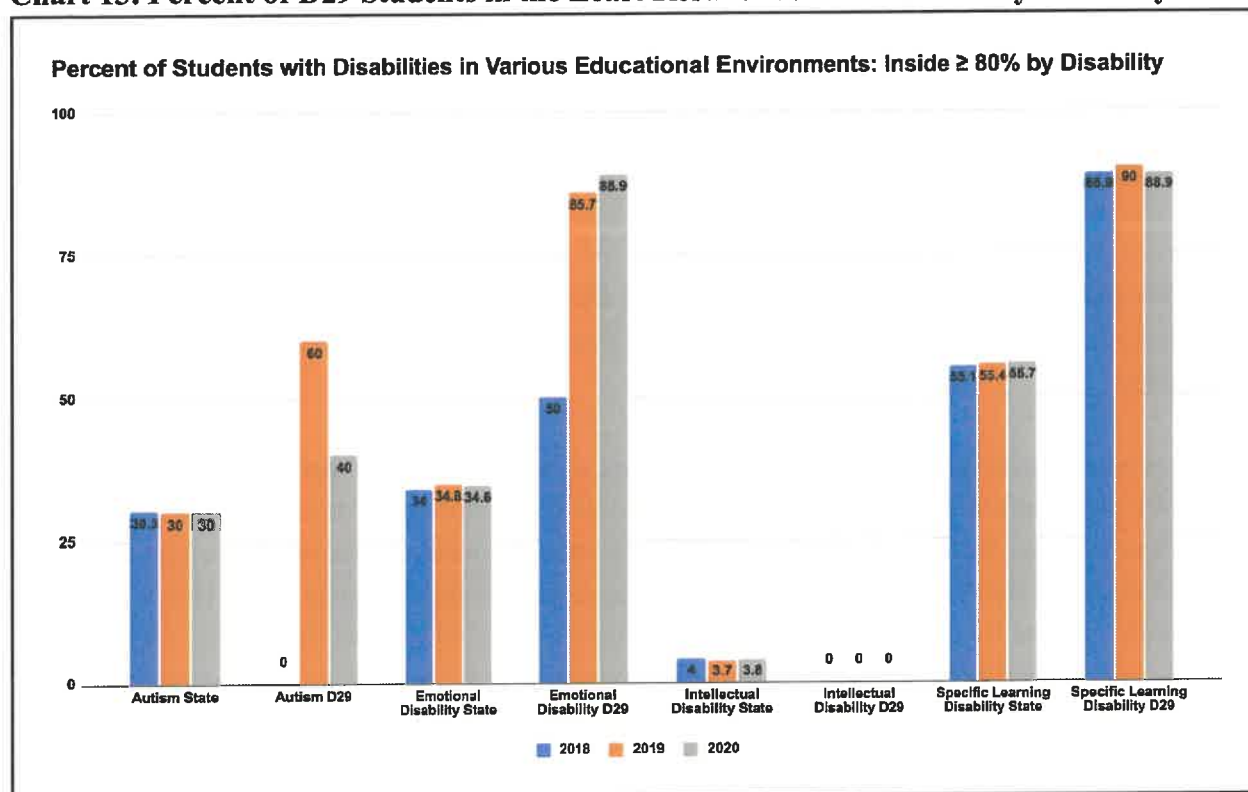
**Chart 12. Percent of Students with Disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment Across the State, NSSD Member Districts and D29**



A particular strength was noted relative to the placement of students with Specific Learning Disability and Emotional Disability eligibility, in comparison to other Illinois school districts, as illustrated by Chart 13. Additionally, NSSD reported a “Clear positive decline in students educated in separate facilities (particularly for students in the Emotional Disability category)”. District changes over the last five years that have likely contributed to these areas of strength and improvement include the addition of the Structured Learning Environment (SLE) program at Middlefork School, as well as the hiring of a Behavior Interventionist. The role of the Behavior Interventionist has been to build special education teachers’ capacity in working with students with complex social/emotional needs, as well as provide direct services to those students. While intensive work with students has aided the district in educating students within the district versus requiring therapeutic programming in alternate placements, system-wide capacity building has taken a backseat to crisis management. Student services teachers have grown in their ability to problem solve, create behavior intervention plans, and facilitate planned discussions (a strategy to “repair” relationships between adults and students after unexpected behaviors) but crisis

management continues to fall primarily on the psychologist, intern, counselor or behavior interventionist. One item that will be discussed in the Areas for Growth section is a high number of Teaching Assistants working in the district. However, this support is hypothesized to contribute to the district's ability to educate students in district versus via alternate placements.

**Chart 13. Percent of D29 Students in the Least Restrictive Environment by Disability**



From an equity lens, a strength of the district includes equal access for all students, irrespective of disability presence, to participate in extracurricular activities, school performances and exploratory classes. Additionally, the district evidences similar rates of disciplinary action for all students. Students in general education experience a similar number of disciplinary incidents as students receiving special education services (e.g., in-school or out-of-school suspensions). A further celebration emphasized was the academic achievement results reported in the IAR and PARCC scores over the last few years. This data is analyzed by looking at two components. First, the performance of students on the testing and second, the statistical difference between the performance of students without identified disabilities and those with disabilities who receive special education services, referred to as an achievement gap. All district students, regardless of disability presence, perform well above the state peer comparison, scoring more frequently in the Meets or Exceeds categories on those assessments. In the last few years of data collection, the achievement gap is either equal to or lower than the state gap as well.

Information collected via observations, staff interviews and staff surveys indicated the following:

- Staff report support for working together and delivering instruction to a variety of learners.
- Staff believe students without disabilities benefit from students with disabilities being included in general education, and that the district employs highly qualified staff.
- Staff members employ creative thinking and problem solving skills.
- Staff provide positive learning environments with a high level of student engagement.
- There is a high level of family and community support and involvement.

The feedback from NSSED emphasized strong and highly performing special education programming and services.

*Areas for growth* garnered from the data analysis, classroom observations, and staff feedback collected via interviews and survey responses are detailed below. (See Chart 14 for survey responses.)

Students with autism appear to have less likelihood of being included most of the day in general education classrooms/curriculum. Students with autism also appear to be more likely to receive services in separate facilities than other students in special education. As mentioned previously NSSED reflected that the staffing level of teaching assistants appears to be high. This is not necessarily an area for growth as this practice is hypothesized to support the district's high level of students participating in the Least Restrictive Environment. From an equity perspective, an area for growth is in attendance for students with disabilities. Over the past couple of years, students without IEPs were absent at a higher level than students without identified disabilities. (Five percent of the year missed due to unexcused absences is considered truant by the state.) In FY19, absences at or above 17.7 school days missed resulted in 10 percent or more of school days missed. Attendance data indicated 7.3 percent of students without IEPs were absent 17.7 days or more while 10.1 percent of students with IEPs were absent 17.7 days or more. In FY20, 16.6 school days missed resulted in 10 percent or more absences for the school year. Attendance data indicated that 16.9 percent of students without IEPs and 21 percent of students with IEPs were reported absent 10 percent or more of the school year. (It is important to note that during the remote learning position of the FY20 school year all students were reported present each school day, Illinois school districts did not track or report absence data during this time period.)

Feedback from staff regarding their belief in educating students with more complex needs in the Least Restrictive Environment waivers but consistently hovers around approximately 50 percent in most survey categories (e.g. assigned and educated in general education; any and all can learn; IEP goals can be met). Staff report needing strengthened structures to support inclusive practices (e.g., defined roles when in general education; collaborative teaching structures; co-teaching; special/general education teachers needing more training on the others' roles relating to

curriculum and specially designed instruction; common planning time for collaboration). Additionally, a large number of staff members indicated a need in meeting the social and emotional needs for students with more complex profiles. A trend in the survey responses also indicated staff desire for collaborative professional learning.

Best practices in education include the use of a district-wide system of support for all students, typically referred to as Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). District 29 does have components of an MTSS system in place but staff indicated that strengthening an integral component of this system, using data to guide decision making, was desired. A summary of all of these staff themes was identified under the broad recommendation to “increase equity and culturally responsive practices” in the district. In an MTSS System, this is referring to strengthening practices at Tier 1 of the district’s programming (commonly viewed as the services provided to all district students and the general education environment). Staff have a strong commitment to serving students both with and without disabilities. However, they are not fully confident of success in doing so in the general education setting without an increase in professional development. Work in inclusive practices and equitable education for all students is needed. This applies to all students in special education but particularly those with complex academic, cognitive and emotional/behavioral needs. General and special education staff will embark on this learning together through a three-year professional learning cohort provided through NSSD entitled *Designing and Evaluating Instruction for All*. This professional learning program is intended for teams of educators (e.g. special education teacher, general education teacher, coach, and/or other role) to develop a strong foundation in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors to meaningfully educate all students in the least restrictive environment. The rationale for this work is based on the premise that the diversity of our cultures, interests, skills and backgrounds is an asset that makes us stronger and facilitates learning for all. This professional learning program will support educators in the actions that align to this belief to build diversity and asset-based instruction for all learners in their classroom. While NSSD had intended to begin this professional learning model this year, FY21, due to the impact of COVID NSSD postponed the work until FY22. Because this broader cohort was postponed and the district identified a need to nonetheless start some of this work, in FY21 the special education staff has been receiving individualized training from NSSD in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The UDL approach will be one component incorporated in *Designing and Evaluating Instruction for All*. Instruction based on the UDL framework provides high-quality differentiation for all students, including those with special needs within the general education classroom. Benefits have been observed in meaningful inclusion of students with complex needs and increased partnerships between general education and special education teachers. However, there is still work to be done to increase these practices system-wide. We look forward to extending this necessary professional learning cohort with the representative team of educators from different disciplines. This work with the full district is necessary to increase equity and culturally responsive classrooms, as this is a combined effort between special education and

general education practices.

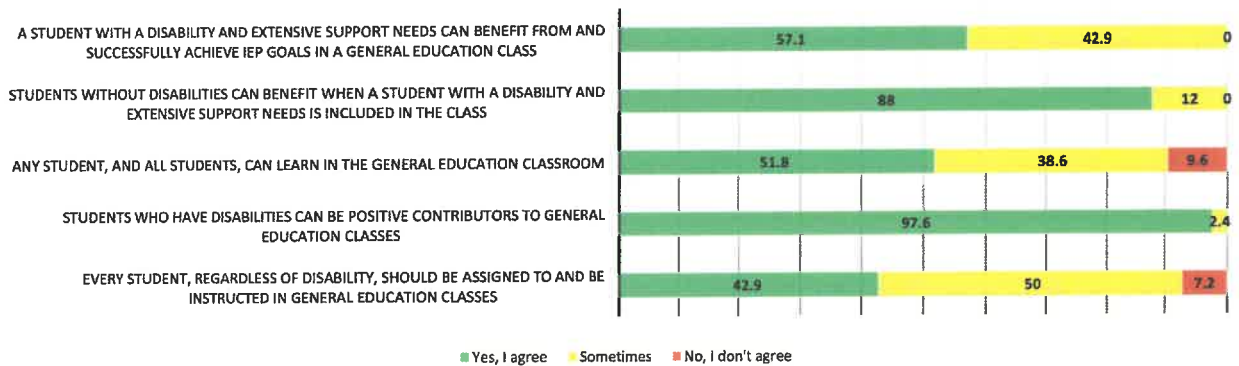
In addition to academic practices at Tier 1, staff indicated a strong need for Social Emotional Learning incorporated into a structured MTSS Framework as well as professional learning targeted on meeting the social/emotional needs of students, particularly those with more complex profiles. While it was stated previously that, in part due to the addition of the Behavior Interventionist to our staffing, the district has made growth in and should celebrate the inclusion of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, a need exists to strengthen the SEL supports district-wide. The district has been utilizing a psychologist intern for increased supports. In years where D29 has been fortunate enough to employ a highly skilled and experienced intern, some work at the universal level has been able to be provided. For example, in FY20 the Behavior Interventionist and Psychologist conducted multi-week trainings to grade-level teams to build problem solving skills and skills related to serving students with social and emotional needs. This work was interrupted when the district closed due to COVID. With this unique school year and needing to support increased student needs it has been unable to be resumed. Unfortunately, providing such skill building is contingent on the amount of time these practitioners can dedicate to such work; service delivery to students with identified disabilities or students in crisis impacts the availability of time to accomplish such professional learning. Continued work to build capacity of the district system in working with students with SEL needs was recommended. Also necessary is a clarification of the district's role in supporting students experiencing social, emotional and behavior challenges.

Regarding services to students, an identified area of need was transition planning beginning at earlier grade levels. As background, the state and federal governments require school districts to create Postsecondary Transition Plans for students receiving special education services upon turning 14.5 years of age. Postsecondary transition is the transition of high school students to their next stage in life, whether it be a two- or four- year college or technical school, the workforce, an assisted living facility, or other options. Planning for these transitions with students is critical in order to incorporate individual student goals and desires, and to increase the likelihood of a smooth transition. These transitional supports are important for all students, but are required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Particularly for students with disabilities, planning for life beyond high school is critical in ensuring that they will continue to receive appropriate occupational, social, and environmental supports. Recent research includes a recommendation that school districts start this process earlier than 14.5 years old (typically a student's 8th grade or 9th grade year), particularly for students with complex needs, in order to incorporate the instruction of life skills into their educational programming. To this end, NSSD is adding to their continuum of services available to districts which includes transition planning support starting at 6th grade. District 29 will be taking part in this work to best prepare our students with high needs to transition to high school and life beyond.

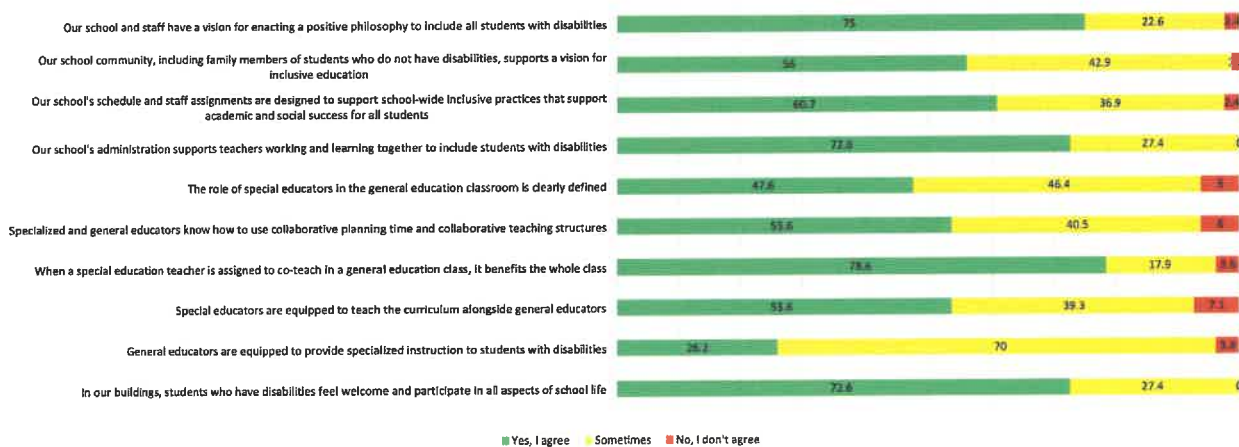
#### **Chart 14. District Staff Survey Results**



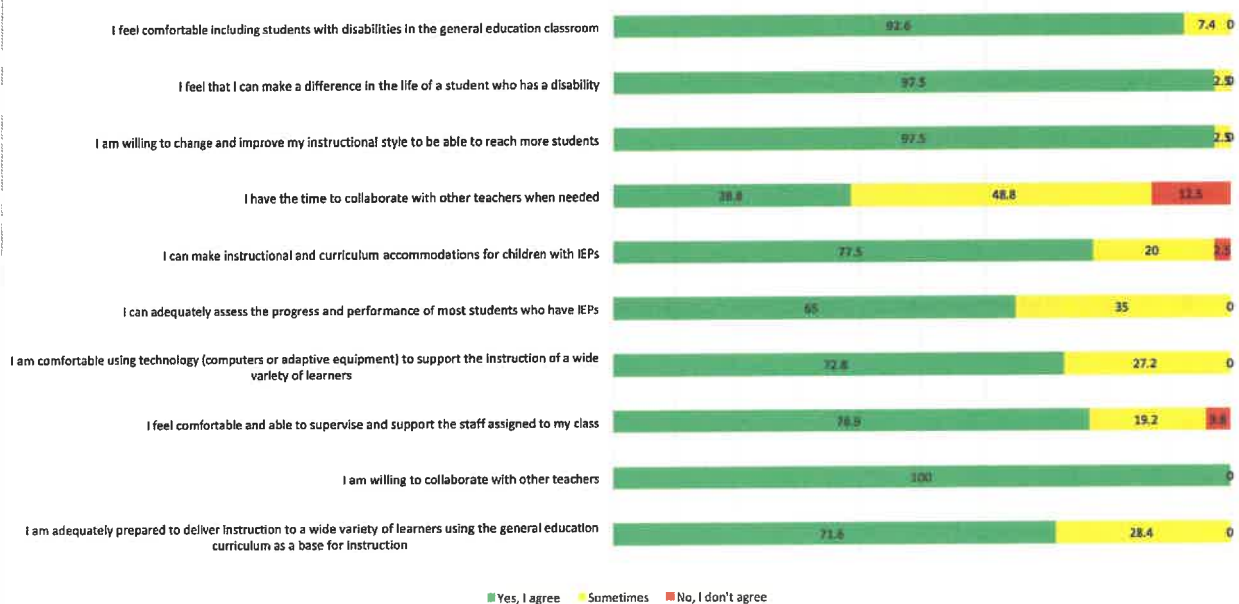
## My beliefs about educating students with disabilities:



## My beliefs about the role of educators in my school:



## My beliefs about my ability to educate all learners in general education classrooms:



In sum, the District's Student Services Department handles an array of services designed to



support both resident and non-resident students in attaining an appropriate educational program. Approximately 17 percent of the current students are eligible for special education services. The cost of implementing student services is a significant portion of the District's overall budget and is on an increasing trend. The majority of student services expenses are associated with staff (salaries and benefits) hired to provide mandated special education services. There is a significant disparity between the cost of these mandated special education services and the funding available through the federal and state government to support the service mandates. An additional area of high expenditures relates to out-of-district placements. A commitment to educating students in the district will reduce the number of outplacements and increase meaningful inclusion, subsequently continuing our commitment to best practices for students with disabilities while also reducing the current costs to the district. The District is currently educating a number of students that would previously have been attending one of the more restrictive special education programs. District staff believe in educating students with disabilities alongside general education peers but worry that when presented with students with exceptionally complex needs, they lack the necessary skill set. Strengthening the district's MTSS system and professional development/coaching is recommended to build the district's capacity to include students with unique academic, cognitive, and emotional/behavioral needs. This work starts with an understanding of the rationale behind the benefits of educating all students in the Least Restrictive Environment and extends to skill building in best practices and instructional techniques to provide such meaningful inclusion. Also necessary is a defined structure within which to do so.

The results of the Systems Assessment indicated strengths in the areas of:

- Educating students within the Least Restrictive Environment
- Availability of resources and supports
- Family engagement

Opportunities for growth suggested were:

- Building a shared philosophy of inclusion
- Capacity building in inclusive practices, particularly for students with complex emotional/behavioral needs as well as for those with complex cognitive/academic needs
- Clarifying roles and expectations, particularly regarding the role of mental health supports in schools
- Strengthening the MTSS model using data-based decision making
- Analyzing the requirement for the current number of teaching assistants