



Two Rivers Supervisory Union Special Education Review *Findings & Recommendations*

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June 17, 2026



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Introduction

The Two Rivers Supervisory Union (TRSU) is a multi-town, multi-district supervisory union serving the communities of Andover, Baltimore, Cavendish, Chester, Ludlow, and Mount Holly. It comprises the Green Mountain Unified School District and the Ludlow-Mount Holly Unified Union School District. TRSU is responsible for ensuring the provision of special education services to all eligible students in its member towns.

The special education system is a complex part of the public school organization that requires simultaneous attention paid to educational best practices, legal and regulatory compliance, and effective and efficient service provision. Having a deep understanding of how services are delivered within the system, how resources are distributed across schools, and the extent to which students' needs are being met is critical to meet the legal requirement for students with disabilities - and to ensure that the District can effectively carry out its mission for all learners.

The Two Rivers Supervisory Union (TRSU) contracted with the Consultant to conduct a comprehensive review of its district special education programming. The review focused on the strengths and challenges of the TRSU's current special education system and included the following goals:

Program Review Goals

- Work with district leadership to understand the current district context, including strengths, challenges and goals for the program review.
- Assess the current alignment of special education practices in the district with evidence-based practices for students with disabilities, and the extent to which current practices are meeting the academic, social and emotional needs of identified students.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of inclusion strategies and identify ways to promote an inclusive learning environment for all students. This includes an examination of the continuum of placements currently being utilized for students.
- Analyze the allocation of resources, including staffing and service delivery, to ensure the SU can effectively support students and promote equity and access to high quality instruction
- Provide actionable recommendations and work with identified leaders to establish a framework for ongoing refinement of special education practices

Methodology

Special education services are an entitlement for eligible students with disabilities; school districts are required by state and Federal laws to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). These services are individualized to meet the unique needs of each eligible student's disability and must be grounded in research-based practices so they can thrive in their educational environment. Thus, special education is resource-intensive, and districts must have a deep understanding of how special education services are delivered and how they are impacting student outcomes as they make budget decisions.

This analysis focuses on instructional practices, along with student demographics, resource allocation and decision making structures within special education. It analyzes the alignment of district practices with evidence-based, high-leverage special education practices. Recommendations are offered so that TRSU can move closer to full implementation of these practices, resulting in more robust service delivery and increased compliance with special education requirements.

Overview of Evidence-Based Practices

The following four categories represent a consistent and long-standing body of research about practices that have been demonstrated to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. These practices cross grade spans and disability categories, and therefore are useful in this kind of analysis because they make clear what a district should be striving for in order to make a difference for special education students across multiple schools and settings. Appendix B includes a selection of the supporting research for these practices.

I. Collaboration

Schools understand collaboration as an important practice, but within special education it is especially critical. Students who have disabilities are general education students first, and in order to access general education instruction as well as their specialized services they require accommodations and modifications. All educators who serve these students must have an awareness of their disability and specific needs, as well as an understanding of any legally required accommodations and modifications in their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Collaboration allows varied perspectives and areas of expertise to be part of instructional decisions, ensures coherence across instructional settings, and allows for collective monitoring of student progress so that instruction can be adjusted as needed. It also enables effective communication and collaboration with families, caregivers and other providers. Schools must have structures in place so that educators can team effectively.

II. Responsive, Data-Driven Instruction

Specialized instruction must be responsive to the student, during each instructional session and over time. It requires a deep knowledge of the student's performance data so that teams can appropriately adjust instruction in the moment. Data driven planning allows for

more targeted intervention, and allows all educators working with the student to react in real time to how students are responding to their instruction. Educators must use multiple kinds of data to inform their “next instructional move”, and collaborative structures must be developed so that teams can review data collected across settings.

III. Expert Instruction (Academic and Behavioral)

Students with disabilities must receive their instruction from the most qualified educator for the given instructional area (academic or behavioral). Research supports a number of effective universal practices that have demonstrated effectiveness across settings and grades, such as explicit instruction, utilization of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, a focus on accelerating growth, and coherence across instructional settings. In addition, systems must have access to the individualized expertise to meet students’ specific needs as well as the structures needed to determine who is most suited for instruction.

Expert instruction requires a system to know where its expertise is and deploy it appropriately. In some cases, classroom teachers have the most expertise to provide some kinds of intervention, freeing up interventionists and special educators for more targeted and specialized instruction. Other expertise can be accessed through a consultative model (related services, behavior services and others). Districts need to understand their system capacity and organize themselves to be able to deploy it appropriately.

IV. Intensification & Individualization

The term “specialized instruction” is important in special education - it is the legal definition of what kind of instruction students with disabilities require. In practice, specialized instruction looks like good instruction that increases in intensity (e.g., delivered more frequently), is more individualized (tailored to the student based on data) and is delivered by a professional with additional expertise. Special education services, generally speaking, should be more intensive and individualized than the instruction available to students without disabilities. These interventions must be provided *in addition to* core instruction, and should *supplement, not supplant* the classroom instruction.

All four, taken together, must exist in a school and community culture that fosters **belonging** for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities grow when their education systems remove barriers to accessing instruction, foster participation in school life and extracurricular activities, and facilitate positive relationships with peers and adults.

Staffing Metrics

This review relies on a body of research that has examined the staffing levels required to implement the above practices. It is important to note that there is no single way to provide special education services. Indeed, the way to design a service delivery model (that also allows for the essential individualization required under the law), is to identify the instructional practices that are to be implemented, understand the context in which services are delivered (school size, demographics, etc) and design service delivery to ensure those practices are in place for all students. There is, however, a body of research that identifies a range of staffing metrics that are typically in place for districts implementing the above practices. This review utilizes special

education density and other metrics in its analysis that are explained further in the Findings section below.

It is important to note: Efficiency is not the primary goal for the delivery of special education. Instead, the district's job is to develop a service delivery model that meets the needs of its most vulnerable learners. However, it is true that efficiencies can be gained within the system when it is designed cohesively around these practices. In fact, a poorly designed service delivery model can actually be more costly to the district, either through inefficient duplication of services or because poor service delivery results in the need for high cost individualized programming resulting from a lack of capacity within the system.

General Education Capacity & Unified Systems

Finally, it is well understood in the research that a system can't improve practices in special education without reflecting on the entire instructional system. Special education practices are implemented within the context of a successful multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). A strong MTSS requires that schools provide strong first instruction in the general education classroom, identify students at the earliest sign of struggle and provide early, quality intervention to prevent further challenges. MTSS structures are a requirement in Vermont under Act 173 of 2018 as well as the Education Quality Standards. When a school district has limited or inconsistent MTSS structures, special education becomes the only way for students to receive intervention. This can put increased pressure on the special education system to serve students who otherwise would have their needs met within the system of support for all students. It can result in fewer resources being available to serve students who truly require special education - and it can be costly.

Overview of Methods

The approach for this review was to analyze the district against the above practices, using a variety of both quantitative and qualitative data. It was conducted between March and June of 2026, with the site visits and interview components occurring in May of 2026. The review was intended to be iterative and responsive, and began with a meeting with the Superintendent and Director of Student Support Services to review the proposed process and make necessary changes. The Director of Student Support Services and Consultant met frequently throughout the process to adjust the review in response to the work as it developed. The review included:

- An analysis of district special education data, including identification rates, demographics, staffing and evaluation patterns
- Site visits in each school (including visits to TRSU's in-house alternative classrooms)
- Interviews with district and building leaders, special educators, classroom teachers, support staff and related service providers

A qualitative analysis was conducted on all of the above information to surface common themes. This analysis resulted in the findings and recommendations below

District Context

It is instructive in a review of special education to understand demographic patterns of the general population as well as the special education population. This helps a district understand the complexity of needs within its system and adjust resources appropriately. It also provides information about whether the population justifies additional resources, human or otherwise. For this review, however, it was difficult to access several key metrics. The data limitations are noted at the bottom of this section and also referenced in the body of the report. In the future, it will be important for the district leadership team to regularly collect and review special education demographic data.

Eligibility Rates & Disability Severity

The following section illustrates special education eligibility rates and disability comparisons between district schools as well as how TRSU compares with Vermont as a whole (this data is more readily available right now, as the State recently issued a report on the [State of Special Education](#)). An important contextual note to this comparison: *Vermont itself is disproportionate in several areas when compared to the rest of the country.* This Consultant does not draw positive or negative conclusions from this, and a deeper analysis of why this pattern exists is beyond the scope of this report - but it is important to realize that the demographic realities TRSU is facing are also being faced across Vermont. This means that the district may benefit from any actions taken at a statewide level.

As illustrated in Table 1, the district has a higher percentage of students eligible for special education than the rest of the state (26.1% vs. 19.6%). And, individual schools within TRSU have much higher rates than in the rest of Vermont (Ludlow is the highest, with 41% of their student body eligible for special education). Here again: *Vermont itself* has a disproportionately higher percentage of students eligible for special education when compared to states across the country, and so being “in line” or higher than Vermont is high.

There are factors in TRSU that may contribute to the relatively high rates of identification. Nationally, there is a correlation between high rates of economically disadvantaged students and high rates of special education disability (it is important to note that this does mean that poverty *causes* disability; it is simply a correlation). Poverty data was not provided for this analysis (see data limitations below), but this may be worth exploring.

Another factor that will be addressed further in this report relates to TRSU’s systems of support available to students before they become eligible for special education. TRSU lacks structures for providing intervention services for students who need support through the school’s educational support system. It is possible within this context that an IEP is the only way students can receive intervention (a common occurrence in districts with limited education support structures). This

can increase special education rates as well, as teams resort to the special education process to provide services.

When a district focuses on increasing non-categorical supports through their MTSS the result is often a decrease in special education eligibility, because more students' needs are being met prior to identification. Thus, the focus should be on increasing those support structures (see below) rather than “decreasing” eligibility.

Table 1: District and State Special Education Eligibility Rates

	Cavendish	Chester-Andover	Ludlow	Mount Holly	GMUHS	District	Vermont
% on an IEP	26%	25%	41%	22%	25%	26.1%	19.6%

In addition, the analysis explored the extent to which TRSU serves a higher than typical rate of students with more intensive disabilities, who often require highly specialized services. For purposes of this illustration, “severity” is defined by comparing the “Mild” and “Intensive” disability categories defined in the funding weights from [Act 73 of 2025](#), which were developed based on research about cost factors and instructional practices. This is an imperfect measure of disability complexity, but is useful in this review simply to understand patterns of disability severity across the system in comparison with the state.

TRSU serves a higher than typical rate of students with more intensive disabilities - Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), orthopedic impairment, and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). As a district, 15.4% of students on an IEP are considered to have intensive disabilities compared with 10.5% in the state as a whole. Cavendish and Ludlow have the highest percentage of intensive disabilities at 26.7% and 26.9%, respectively, significantly higher than the state.

Students in these categories often require a higher level of specialized services as well as additional accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom. Further in this review there will be recommendations about increasing the capacity of the general education environment to meet the needs of these students, and a close examination of the continuum of placements within districts.

Table 2: Disability Severity (K-12)

	% of students on an IEP	% of total IEP w/ Mild Disability	% of total IEP w/ Intensive Disability
State	19.6%	33.3%	10.5%
District	26.1%	42.0%	15.4%
Cavendish	25.9%	33.3%	26.7%
Chester- Andover	25.1%	43.4%	13.2%
Ludlow	40.6%	26.9%	26.9%
Mount Holly	22.5%	70.0%	5.6%
GMUHS	24.8%	37.8%	9.5%

Within State Levels; Outside of State Levels (more than 10%); Significantly outside of State Levels (more than 30%)

Data Limitations

Special Education Patterns

Overall, it was challenging for the district to provide important data about patterns and trends within and across special education in TRSU. Information such as identification rates, disability categories, alternative placements, inclusion data and more can be helpful to review frequently. This information is available within the management system, but was not able to be gathered for this report. The difficulty gathering this data suggests that the district is unlikely to be monitoring it on a regular basis.

Disproportionality

From an equity standpoint, it is important to deeply understand patterns of special education identification and placement compared to other student characteristics such as race, poverty, and homelessness. This data is important not only to better understand the instructional needs of the student body (e.g., students with identified characteristics such as poverty or multi-lingualism tend to require additional instructional support & resources), but also to be aware of potential disproportionality.

Leveraging Strengths

Special education remains one of the most complex and demanding areas of education, particularly in today's climate of evolving student needs, staffing challenges, and increasing regulatory requirements. In this context, it is critical for TRSU to understand their strengths and leverage what is working in order to make changes - especially when those changes may be significant. Throughout this analysis it was evident that TRSU has committed educators, service providers, and support staff working with dedication and perseverance to meet the needs of its students and families. Many staff have spent their careers in this system, and have good ideas about what might help support improvement for students. This kind of commitment means that the district has a strong foundation on which to begin their work of improving practices.

Proactive Desire for Change

TRSU sought out this review to inform the supervisory union leadership team about continuous improvement in special education. Interviews and commentary align with this recognition of and desire for change. Those interviewed expressed gratitude that special education was a focus and indicated that they look forward to hearing the recommendations.

Notable Examples of Excellence & Expertise

There is significant expertise within the system, and in many places individual teams or classrooms have an understanding of the high-leverage practices - they know what it should look like. While those practices are not evident universally, it does give each school building a place to start. Leaders can identify areas of strength and uplift those who make it happen, creating layers of teacher leadership within the system.

Strong Building Leadership Collaboration

The collaboration between principals in TRSU is strong, particularly among the elementary school leaders. During interviews and site visits, principals talked about their own formal and informal collaborative structures, and gave several examples of their team sharing expertise and troubleshooting challenges in their respective buildings. A critical component of whole-system change is for a leadership team to make *collective* decisions, not just decisions based on the needs of their own building - this team appears to have the collaborative mindset to make this happen.

First Instruction Focus

During interviews and visits, it became evident that leaders understand the need to focus on first instruction to improve practices for students with disabilities. Within buildings, individual leaders have facilitated a focus on early literacy instruction and whole-school SEL (the RULER approach is being implemented in several schools). There is a clear expectation that students should not be removed from first instruction in order to receive their intervention. Principals have worked to

reinvigorate MTSS processes in the district, and several individuals noted improvement in the special education referral process since focusing on MTSS. Even if these efforts are not yet uniform across the system, they represent strong starting points for improvements that will be critical for students with and without disabilities.

Findings

Any organization seeking to review its practices generally has an idea of what challenges exist. They have often identified areas in need of work, and seek additional information and perspective to inform their decision making. Thus, these findings are unlikely to be a surprise for those in the system - in fact, many of them emerged during conversations with district staff. This will be important as TRSU turns its attention to further unpacking this review and deciding the best path forward for the system.

The findings below were developed after a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data gathered as part of the review.

FINDING: Complex governance structures impact unity of decision making overall, and particularly in special education

Like many supervisory unions in Vermont, TRSU is comprised of multiple school districts that, until relatively recently, would have largely built and managed their special education systems individually. While special education has been unified at the SU level for several years, there is still significant variation in special education decision making and service delivery across the system. In some cases, how special educators are assigned and services are delivered are driven by previous models in each school. This variation is problematic in general but is acutely challenging within special education because the result is that highly regulated decisions (about eligibility, service delivery and more) are school-dependent.

The governance structure limits TRSU's ability to creatively design service delivery and share resources. For staff who work across the SU, many can identify potential areas for collaboration, coordination or shared service delivery - but these ideas can't be enacted because they would require crossing school district lines (for example: early childhood special education).

There is no apparent process for district-wide decision making, and little understanding of what decisions are meant to be local and what decisions should be more consistent across the system.

Qualitative data from this review suggests that decision making authority in special education is fragmented and unclear. Many decisions seem to originate locally, but are sometimes overruled or changed at the district level. While this may be appropriate (in Vermont, special education is, by law, provided by the Supervisory Union and the legal authority and responsibility for making final decisions is appropriately held at that level), there is little internal clarity and transparency about the nature and origin of those decisions.

Whether decisions should be centralized or decentralized is not an either/or determination. When centralization goes up, individualization (and therefore context-specific differences) goes down; but when decisions are more decentralized, equity can decrease. When there is a clear vision for special education services, it becomes easier to develop policies, procedures and decision making processes that balance equity and local decision making.

FINDING: TRSU lacks a strong instructional vision for special education services, resulting in inconsistent implementation of evidence-based instructional practices.

Districts that have developed a cohesive vision for special education services (grounded in evidence-based practices) have increased clarity and understanding of what all students should have access to relative to special education. They use those “guiding principles” as a foundation for decisions about everything from resource allocation to procedures for determining student placement. A vision for special education allows districts to be clear about instructional practices while still adjusting services for individual building and student context. When this clarity is missing, it can be difficult to ensure equity of access to services, difficult to make decisions that are consistent and transparent across the system, and difficult to analyze and address variability in practice. It can also lead to inefficiencies and impedes decisions about budget and resource allocation.

In TRSU, this cohesive vision is lacking. There doesn’t appear to be a universal understanding of or focus on evidence-based instructional practices for special education at the district level. Decision making about services is very distributed, and so without a shared vision there is significant variability in the services provided to students. Special educators report that there are very few opportunities for formal collaboration or shared professional learning across the district. When coordination occurs at the district level, it is reported to be mainly focused on compliance. Despite this, special educators also report that there are few organized ways to monitor compliance practices across schools, and they describe great variability in evaluation practices, the writing of IEP goals, and other basic compliance issues.

As part of the review, instructional practices were examined through classroom walkthroughs and interviews. There are several areas to highlight for specific, prioritized attention; these are described below.

Lack of Collaboration for the Codesign of Instruction

TRSU lacks formal structures that would allow the basic collaboration required to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Collaboration is a clear and critical component of effective practice for

students with disabilities. It is not “extra” - it is a required component of special education service delivery. When collaboration does not exist, classroom teachers and special educators do not have the opportunity to work together to discuss instruction in the classroom and intervention setting. Classroom teachers and special educators alike report that there is no expectation for co-planning and co-design. Services therefore remain “siloed”, and teams do not have a shared understanding of how the student is responding to instruction. In many cases, classroom teachers were unaware of how their students were progressing towards IEP goals.

Limited Ability to Implement Data-Driven Instructional Decisions

Another pillar practice for special education service delivery is the ability for educators to use a variety of instructional data to develop, review and adjust instruction. This is what makes specialized and grade level instruction effective for students with disabilities. Neither the schools nor the district as a whole appear to review data in any cohesive manner to identify instructional weakness and adjust professional development.

Overreliance on Support Staff for Delivery of Instruction & Intervention

When asked about how special education services are provided (or, sometimes, when asked what prevents services from being provided), interviewees overwhelmingly reference support staff (paraprofessionals) as the primary providers of special education instruction and accommodation. Often those staff don't have the opportunity to meet regularly with licensed educators, and are left on their own to develop accommodations and interventions. When services are largely provided by support staff, students aren't experiencing the content area expertise needed to accelerate their learning. Further, when classroom instruction is not designed to provide basic accommodations and modifications required for students with disabilities, the system often relies heavily on other adults to implement those practices.

Limited Understanding of Educational Practices for Students with Complex and Low-Incidence Disabilities

There are particular misunderstandings about how (and where) students with complex learning profiles should be educated. This will be addressed in more detail under the Alternative Programming section of the report.

FINDING: TRSU does not have a consistent and coherent methodology for special educator assignment and role definition (e.g., service delivery model)

Without an articulated instructional vision and a deep understanding of the students served, it is difficult for a system to have a cohesive and coherent method of determining how special educators should be assigned across the system. In this context, it can feel as though staffing is inadequate - and this was certainly expressed during interviews.

This analysis examined patterns of special education staffing across the district, and included a look at the number of special education professional and paraprofessional staff in each building. The analysis looked at the ratio of special education professionals to total student body (known as special educator density), the ratio of special education professionals to students on IEPs, and the ratio of special education paraprofessionals to students on IEPs. Ratios were then compared between buildings.

As noted above, there are many models for special education service delivery and there is no single “right number” of staff. However, there is a consistent body of research that suggests staffing ranges for meeting the needs of a school. A special education density of 1 special educator for every 50-80 students is considered sufficient staffing to meet the needs of all students. In a system like TRSU, with a higher percentage of students eligible for special education, it is also important to look at the number of special education professionals compared to the number of students on IEPs - this ensures sufficient staffing for the number of students needing service. And finally, the number of special education paraprofessionals was compared to students on IEPs.

Table 3: K-12 special education staffing

	Total Students	Students on IEPs (Childcount)	Special Education Prof ¹	Special Education Paras ²
Cavendish	58	15	3.5	5
Chester-Andover	211	53	6	18
Ludlow	64	26	5.5	6.5
Mount Holly	89	20	4.5	8.5
GMUHS	299	74	15.5	10
District	721	188	35	48

¹Includes special education funded licensed staff: Special Educators/504 Coordinators, SLPs, BCBAs and Clinicians.

²Includes special education paraprofessionals and Behavior Interventionists

Table 4: K-12 special education ratios

	Special Educator Density	Special Education Prof to Childcount	Special Education Paras to Childcount
Cavendish	1:17	1:4	1:3
Chester-Andover	1:35	1:9	1:3
Ludlow	1:12	1:5	1:4
Mount Holly	1:20	1:4	1:2
GMUHS	1:54	1:5	1:7
District	1:21	1:5	1:4
Target Range	1:50 - 1:80 (+/- 10)	1 to 10 (+/-1)	1 to 6 (+/- 1)
Research	Research: Giangreco (2009); DMG Report (2017) shows national ratios of special education teachers as 1 per 100.	DMG report (2017) references 1:15 in states with comparable inclusive model; 1:5 is district average. 1:10 selected as a reasonable target - halfway between national data and District average	DMG Report 1 to 7 Childcount, based on 15.6 for every 1000); Giangreco's 2015 whole school model would have 1:8. 1:4 is district average. 1:6 selected as target - halfway between national and district.

Within District Range; Outside of District Range; Significantly outside of district range (more than 30%)

Professional Staff

Currently, TRSU has more than sufficient levels of professional staff by typical metrics to serve a system of its size. Based on this Consultant's judgement and comparison to like schools, TRSU is not "understaffed", even when considering the high percentage of eligible students and complexity of disabilities.

Anecdotally, district and school-based staff report workforce shortages and vacancies as a significant challenge, and this is certainly relevant from the standpoint of finding qualified professionals. Many interviewees, in fact, expressed frustration at district hiring decisions, noting that they would receive staff who had been removed from previous schools for performance issues and/or did not have the specific expertise needed for a given assignment. However, from a

sufficiency standpoint, the district has the human resources it needs to meet the needs of the population it serves.

Paraprofessional Staff

Similarly, paraprofessional ratios in TRSU are consistently higher than evidence based ratios in para use for inclusive settings. District-wide, on average, there is a paraprofessional for every 4 students on IEPs - and in the most highly staffed school, there is a paraprofessional for every two students on IEPs. Interviewees, however, consistently identified a lack of support staff as a challenge in the system, which suggests that the system as a whole relies heavily on paraprofessionals for implementation of special education services. These perceptions may also be exacerbated by the following:

- There is a significant amount of paraprofessional turnover and positions are often vacant. This results in frequent, involuntary reassignment of paraprofessionals to cover other students, often students with more significant needs. This can become a vicious cycle - districts need to triage their remaining staff to their most acute needs, resulting in more and more involuntary reassignments and more resignations.
- There is limited ability to provide comprehensive training to support staff when asked to work with students who have highly specialized needs

During the review, it was evident that paraprofessionals were often providing basic accommodations and modifications required for students with disabilities - they might be modifying academic tasks on the fly, creating visual supports or graphic organizers, and prompting students through tasks. These kinds of instructional adjustments should be part of a universally designed, differentiated classroom. When classroom instruction is not designed to provide basic accommodations and modifications required for students with disabilities, the system often relies heavily on additional adults to implement those practices. Even when fully staffed this can siphon resources away from students with complex learning profiles who may need significant instructional support to access their education.

Important Note: I would strongly discourage readers to interpret the above as a recommendation to reduce staff. Instead the district should be looking closely at how these human resources are allocated and used, particularly right now as they support limited capacity in first instruction practices.

FINDING: Core Instruction Lacks the Capacity to Meet Most Needs of Most Learners

In a healthy educational system, the majority of students (~80%) should have most of their instructional needs met in the general education environment. A small percentage of students (~10-15%) may need additional, supplemental instruction in addition to quality first instruction, and very few students (~5%) typically would require significant additional instruction. In TRSU, a disproportionately high percentage of students is identified as “needing additional support” through an IEP, 504 plan or an Educational Support Plan (EST). Currently, 40% of students are identified as being on one of those three plans; in one school, 61% of the student body is on a plan. This data is a clear indication that classroom instruction alone is not meeting the needs of a sufficient number of TRSU students.

Table 5: Students identified in need of a support plan by school

	Cavendish	Chester-Andover	Ludlow	Mount Holly	GMUHS	District
% on an EST Plan	17.2%	3.3%	15.6%	0.0%	4.4%	5.6%
% on a 504 Plan	5.2%	5.7%	4.7%	5.6%	13.4%	8.7%
% on IEP	25.9%	25.1%	40.6%	22.5%	24.8%	26.1%
Total	48.3%	34.1%	60.9%	28.1%	42.5%	40.4%

Interview themes suggest teachers lack an understanding of their responsibility for ensuring grade level instruction is accessible to all learners. While some promising practices exist (for example: In most schools, there is an understanding that students should not leave core instruction to receive their intervention), the instruction itself is not modified in any observable manner, and many teachers expressed their understanding that it is a special educator’s job, not theirs, to adjust instruction. This lack of shared responsibility is further exacerbated by the lack of collaborative structures that would allow special educators and classroom teachers to work together to improve accessibility.

Further, teachers across the system expressed a belief that students who are more than one or two grade levels below their peers *should* be educated elsewhere until they catch up, and many believe that special education or intervention systems are responsible for that. In several interviews, educators would share examples of instructional strategies and accommodations that

they believe justified students being placed outside of the classroom for their core instruction - but the examples given were what research would describe as basic accommodations that can and should be provided in the classroom. This is notable, especially when considering the disproportionately high number of students educated outside of the classroom in TRSU (see below finding).

District and building leadership have acknowledged that TRSU does not have consistent multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in place. Principals have recognized this, and have worked together to solidify some common practices, but these are not universally implemented across the system.

Put simply, an MTSS structure ensures that students are identified early when they are not meeting academic and social emotional standards. Teams then convene to determine what instructional adjustments or interventions should be made - many of which begin in the classroom - and collect data to measure whether the student responds to the intervention. If not, the team reconvenes to determine next steps. When there is no system of support outside of the special education system, a disproportionate number of resources is taken up in the “intervention layer” of the school. Rich professional development in high leverage intervention practices, when infused into classroom instruction, can greatly expand the capacity of teachers to respond to students who are struggling, thus allowing intervention resources (including special education staff) to be reserved for the most tangled learners.

FINDING: TRSU has inconsistencies in how it designs, assigns students to, and runs alternative educational programming

The district specifically requested that this review examine placement practices and district-developed alternative classrooms, acknowledging that a high number of students (especially at the high school) were referred for alternative programming. This section will include an overview of inclusion rates in the system as well as a specific analysis of the three in-house programs - Treehouse, Horizons and Bridges.

Note: An accurate analysis of inclusion rates was difficult to ascertain due to the data limitations noted previously. There were inconsistencies in how students placed outside of the general education environment were represented in the data from the district, and at times those counts did not match the overall number of students identified for special education. This limits the ability to make a statewide comparison. After follow-up conversations did not resolve the inconsistencies, the Consultant chose to report only the percentage of students educated fully inside and outside of the general education environment in the table below. It is important for the

district to develop more regular data examination practices in order to have a strong, accurate understanding of their placement patterns and to review that data regularly.

Table 6: Placement Comparisons (access to general education)

	80% or more in Gen Ed Environment	Less than 40% in the Gen Ed Environment <u>and</u> Separate Classroom (in or out of district)
State	82.32%	9.6%
District	81.9%	12.2%
Cavendish	86.7%	0.0%
Chester-Andover	90.6%	3.8%
Ludlow	92.3%	0.0%
Mount Holly	95.0%	0.0%
GMUHS	67.6%	27.0%

Within State Levels; Outside of State Levels (more than 10%); Significantly outside of State Levels (more than 30%)

Within the district, GMUHS is the biggest outlier when it comes to overall least restrictive environment (LRE) data: 68% of special education students are educated outside of the general education classroom. When removed from the data set, the rest of the district actually has a more inclusive service delivery model when compared with the state.

Importantly: It is commendable that the overall percentage of IEP students who access the general education classroom for most of the day is high at the elementary schools. However, readers must understand these numbers in the context noted above, wherein the report finds that first instruction may not be meeting the grade-level instructional needs of these students - creating a system where they are *present*, but not meaningfully accessing core instruction. These two findings must be taken in tandem and the connection between the two will be addressed in the recommendations.

Program Quality Analysis, In-district Programs

School districts are responsible for ensuring that there is a “continuum of educational placements” for students with disabilities. This means that districts need a number of ways to serve students

who, for reasons connected to their disability, cannot be educated fully in the general education environment. Decisions governing alternative placement are highly regulated by special education law. Thus, alternative classrooms can be an essential part of special education service delivery. Developing programs in-house, as TRSU is attempting to do, can keep students closer to their home schools and can facilitate transition back into the general education environment; they are also more cost effective. Thoughtfully designed programs provide highly targeted instruction tailored to a specific disability profile, ensure meaningful access to the general education curriculum, and include clear and specific criteria to support decision making teams in determining which students are most appropriately placed.

Critically: appropriate placement in an alternative educational setting relies on strong structures within the broader educational system to ensure that all learners have access to a robust educational experience with increasingly specialized support when needed. When the general education environment does not have the capacity to meet the needs of a broad range of students, schools often use highly specialized programming for a larger percentage of students. Given TRSU's high reliance on alternative programming, it is critical that steps be taken to better understand overall instructional capacity in district schools in order to fully ascertain the need for those programs. Some of the more detailed findings below illustrate this issue further.

TRSU in-house classrooms did not have sufficient time and resources dedicated to their design and development, leading to haphazard programming and confusion about appropriate referrals.

The educators charged with developing all three in-house programs expressed that they were not given sufficient time and resources to thoughtfully design and develop the programs. In some cases, there was a "revolving door" of educators assigned to the classrooms. The district and contracted staff who have been tasked with overseeing these programs do hold significant expertise and have made laudable attempts at program design - but the development was rushed, done in isolation and was not part of a broader instructional vision for all learners. Worse, these programs were being developed *while students were assigned there* - "building the plane as it flies." Rather than designing the programs around a specific student profile and targeting expertise accordingly, the programs have been serving students largely by relying on the 1:1 and small group paraprofessionals who work directly with the students in the programs.

While workforce challenges are significant, and it is understandable that the district attempted to find creative solutions to vacancies, students who require alternative programs will not be adequately served if there is not significant expertise dedicated to their development and implementation.

Programs attempt to serve a wide instructional profile of students and it is unclear what instructional and therapeutic approaches are incorporated.

It is not clear what specific, targeted instructional approaches underpin TRSU programs. Although Treehouse and Horizons are loosely understood to serve students with a complex Autism profile and/or significant and complex learning profiles, there is no clear program design even for those students. For the Bridges program it was difficult for staff within and outside of the program to articulate the student profile the program was designed for. Staff acknowledge that the instructional needs of students in the program at times conflict with one another, with some students requiring an accommodation or design adjustment that runs contrary to an approach needed by other students in the program.

When a program serves such a disparate population of students, it is likely that it is not designed appropriately to serve any of them well. Further, when large numbers of students are referred to the program regardless of profile, it is likely indicative of a lack of capacity in the general education classroom. For example: When asked what instructional adjustments Bridges provided for students that could not happen in the general education classroom, the answers were instructional accommodations that *can and should* be easily accommodated in a universally designed classroom - things like personalizing subject matter to promote engagement; multiple access points for grade level text; and relationship-based, trauma informed instruction.

Referral criteria is unclear, and sending schools/placement teams do not have a clear understanding of which students are appropriate for the programs

Without a clear program description or referral process, it can be difficult for decision makers in the system to know what student might be best served in the three alternative programs. Interview data from elementary schools indicated confusion about what students should be referred to each classroom. Leaders noted that there had been so many staffing changes in each program that they were unsure what the current program realities were.

Conversations with educators and leaders alike suggest a broader misunderstanding, both substantively and procedurally, about how and when to contemplate an alternative placement. When the process works as it should, IEP teams identify the “characteristics of placement” - the list of program characteristics, instructional approaches and professional expertise needed to carry out the program outlined in the IEP. They ask themselves whether those program characteristics can be provided in the general education classroom; and if the answer is no, then the team considers what other placement may be able to provide them. This was not the process described during interviews; instead, participants report that the decision to place in an alternative setting is often done by the district, and (from their vantage point) without the perspectives of the team.

Several reported that a district outplacement coordinator will suddenly join an IEP team and name which program is appropriate.

Programs have not consistently been staffed by licensed professionals

Both Treehouse and Horizons, which serve students with complex and low-incidence disabilities, have not been consistently staffed since they were created. Although both have qualified professionals providing some oversight and consultation, they are primarily functioning as classroom spaces where students receive services by paraprofessionals. This calls into question whether the classrooms can truly be called “programs” - they are instructional spaces for non-licensed staff to provide individual services.

It is important to note that this Consultant noted many instances of strong individualized programming happening in these settings. The paraprofessionals observed have clearly received training, and in the case of both Treehouse and Horizons strong individualized programming was occurring. Staff work hard with complex students. However, this cannot take the place of a coherently designed program for this population.

There is a lack of grade level instruction provided in district alternative classrooms, and no apparent understanding that this needs to be a component of programming

All three programs provide little comprehensive access to general education instruction. Given the lack of coherent program design described above, it is difficult to know whether there was ever an intention to include a general education teacher in the programs, and regardless of intent the current staffing shortage means that no programs are consistently staffed by licensed educators. Even if classroom teachers were assigned, the grade span of students served would make it difficult to provide access to the general education curriculum for all students.

In the Bridges program, there has been an attempt to cycle in teachers who have a “free block” to provide grade level instruction, but this is not thoughtfully or coherently designed. General education teachers providing grade level content to students in an alternative setting need specific training about the population they are serving, and a coherently designed curriculum. It is important to recognize that even students focusing on therapeutic or functional goals can access scaffolded academics, and the law requires access to general education even for students in alternative settings.

TRSU lacks capacity in the area of low-incidence or complex disabilities (Treehouse & Horizon)

The need for separate programs for students with intensive needs is often driven by a lack of capacity in the general education environment and a lack of uniform expertise (in general and special education) in the areas of curriculum overlap and multi-level instruction. The solution to this challenge is not to create more separate programs, even though that feels both more efficient (in the face of vacancies) and “better”, since there would be a licensed educator running those programs.

Self-contained intensive needs programming, particularly at the elementary level, removes students from the general education curriculum. Instruction is stripped down to a very basic “functional” curriculum - even at an age when the difference between grade level and student performance level is at its smallest - and crosses multiple grades, making it impossible to be considered general education. Contrary to beliefs voiced during interviews, students with intensive needs can access instruction with even the most basic of access skills (cause/effect; communication) while still being exposed to the general education curriculum.

District staff describe a chaotic evolution of both programs since their inception, with both plagued by significant staffing challenges and a lack of specific expertise - yet, the programs continue to receive students and in fact tuition students from outside of the district.

TRSU is connected to professionals from the Vermont I-team, with strong content knowledge and expertise in designing flexible instructional spaces and utilizing a “hub of expertise” model to meet the needs of this unique population. Treehouse and Horizons, if designed as intended, could serve as this hub of expertise and a space for targeted, individualized instruction. It would require, though, the ability to thoughtfully design and staff the program. A well-designed program for students with significant disabilities is meant to be embedded in the general education classroom and *supplemented* with outside of the classroom time. It needs to be built with the assumption that each student has a “home base” with their grade level classroom. This model is impossible to achieve for students whose home school is out of district.

Recommendations

In generating recommendations for the district to consider, it feels important to acknowledge that special education currently exists in a culture of stress. This makes long-term ideas for change feel distant, and in some ways inadequate, to address the immediate concerns. While the recommendations do attempt to include both short- and long-term action steps, deep change is needed in order to shift special education practices - and deep change is not fast. It also requires cohesion across the district, something that was acknowledged as a challenge. Yet, how a school district meets the needs of its most vulnerable learners says a lot about how it meets the needs of all learners, and the system has already prioritized this work.

Further, enacting the deep changes required to turn around the special education system will require sustained work in both general and special education - it is not work that can be solely accomplished within the student services department. The recommendations in this report will require that the full leadership team spend time analyzing the findings and prioritizing collective work. It also requires that the district begin to more clearly articulate what decisions are collective (district-level) and what level of variability is acceptable locally. It may require that the district prioritize work other than current areas of focus. All of this requires a leadership team that is well-normed, supportive of the goal and has structures for implementation planning.

These recommendations are offered as high impact, systems-level suggestions, allowing the district to go deeper in each one to ensure targeted, specific action steps can be developed by local educators. Systems change occurs when those within the system understand the direction *and* have a part in developing the plan; these recommendations are offered to support that planning.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop and refine district-wide special education leadership structures

There are many supervisory unions in Vermont who have been able to create more unified decision making structures that help to overcome the governance challenges in their system. For TRSU, this will involve establishing vertical collaboration between building and district leaders and clarifying instructional decision making responsibilities .

Specific considerations:

1. Expand the formal and informal collaboration between the curriculum and special education directors:

These two positions play a critical role in *modeling* the unified approach to instruction that is required for improvement in special education. While each have specific areas of the organization they are responsible for, their need to collaborate goes beyond the sharing of

information. In addition to working together more specifically during district leadership meetings, the two directors should consider developing a regular cadence of meeting, together, with each building-based leadership team to streamline decision making and vertical alignment.

2. Consider a redesign of special education leadership to create the capacity for a sustained focus on instructional practices:
 - a. Co-director or assistant director model with one or the other focused specifically on instruction (note: Given the relatively robust staffing across the district, this could be managed by repurposing a vacant position)
 - b. Distributed building leadership: Create or repurpose teacher-leader positions within each building to serve as a leadership team for the special education director. For smaller schools, this could be a stipend position rather than a full FTE.

RECOMMENDATION: Further analyze the instructional capacity of the general education system

Understanding how well the district as a whole implements evidence-based instructional practices is foundational to understanding how special education services are layered on top of overall instruction. This knowledge will give additional context to the placement patterns within the system, and will support the development of a service delivery model for special education. The district should contemplate a gap analysis of MTSS practices as well as an instructional assessment of the evidence-based practices noted in this report, in each school. This work is best led by *both* the Director of Curriculum and the Director of Student Services - this is important, because MTSS is a shared responsibility and requires changes in both general and special education systems. A logical starting point would be to utilize the existing leadership team structure to prioritize and conduct the gap analysis. The Vermont Agency of Education's [MTSS Website](#) has a number of resources to support district self assessment and action planning and may be useful for this process.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop a clear understanding of high leverage instructional practices for students with disabilities, and design a comprehensive service delivery model around those practices

Adherence to evidence-based instructional practices is foundational for improved outcomes for students with disabilities. The findings in this report highlight several specific practices that aren't in place. TRSU would benefit from sustained professional development across both general and special education about the high leverage practices discussed in this analysis. This learning begins

with building and district leaders, so they can understand the system conditions necessary for those practices to be put into place.

Then, the district leadership team should determine how best to align and distribute human resources in order to support those high leverage practices. Districts who have a cohesive model for services will better understand how to utilize the staff they have, and services will feel less disjointed.

The following action steps are important to include as part of the service delivery development:

- *Develop concrete guidelines for the appropriate role of paraprofessionals within the system, and design decision making protocols around those guidelines*

Research does indicate an important role for paraprofessionals in the system. They are critical for providing supplemental reinforcement of skills, data collection, personal care, & social skill facilitation - all as designed by qualified professionals. Paraprofessionals should not be providing specialized instruction, nor should they be used to provide basic classroom accommodations that are expected from classroom teachers. Guidelines for paraprofessional decision making can be designed around the appropriate role of support staff. These guidelines, when developed thoughtfully, should not be “hoops” for teams to jump through - they should support team decision making about instruction and should be developed as part of overall professional development for all staff.

- *Provide system-wide professional development for classroom teachers on the basic components of universal design as part of the district-wide “guiding principles” (see above)*

It is worth highlighting again that systems who lack capacity in the general education environment often *expend resources* by hiring people to make up for deficiencies in the classroom. Increasing classroom capacity can help the district prioritize paraprofessional staff for the most critical support needs, more efficiently targeting this resource where it is most needed.

- *Ensure the conditions exist in each school for collaboration to occur*

While there are many high leverage practices that are currently missing in TRSU, making shifts in collaborative structures will have immediate and significant positive impacts on the ability of the system to meet the needs of special education students. This can include changes to the master schedule, to the workload and assignment of special educators, and the use of planning time.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider short- and longer-term redesign of TRSU alternative programs

Recalling that any attention paid to the development or expansion of alternative programming requires simultaneous work on first instruction (see above), it is critical that the district quickly invest in the redesign of its existing programs. These programs are arguably not meeting student needs right now. The chaotic way each has been developed is likely contributing to the high level of staff turnover, creating a cycle of inconsistency.

It is recommended that the district convene a group of experts and provide dedicated time to a redesign of all three programs, collaboratively, so that the programs can be connected as appropriate. TRSU has the professional expertise in the system now (and through contracts with the Vermont I-team); these educators should be part of the redesign, which should include:

- *A data-based determination of what the district requires for alternative programming*

The design team should analyze the disability categories that are presumed not to be served effectively in the general education environment. This requires a deeper analysis of student demographics than was possible for this review; it will provide a clearer picture of where the capacity gaps are in the system. **Capacity building efforts must go alongside any expansion of students served in an alternative setting.**

- *Identification of clear disability categories and learning profiles served for each program*

Alternative programs exist because they are intended to provide evidence-based instruction tailored to a specific disability or profile. This allows professional development to be tailored for all assigned staff and makes referral criteria clear for the rest of the system.

- *A determination as to how the programs will ensure access to grade-level instruction*

Access to grade level instruction is not optional for students educated outside of the general education setting - it is legally required, and it is an evidence-based instructional practice. It is also critical because, for most student profiles, alternative programming is meant to be temporary. If students cannot progress in the general education curriculum while their individualized needs are being met, they will never be able to effectively reintegrate, even when the achievement of other reintegration skills have been met.

As a starting point, here are two broadly-defined ways to address grade level curriculum access that differ based on the design of the program and the population it serves. These two descriptions are not exhaustive - they are here to illustrate how a team can think about access to grade level instruction:

- Hub & Spoke Model: Students are primarily assigned to their grade level, general education classroom, with ongoing meeting time provided so that the team can carefully codesign appropriate access. The alternative placement serves as a space that students access for some parts of the day (defined by the team) for specialized instruction, highly individualized interventions/therapies, or for targeted breaks.

In this model, there does not need to be a “general education teacher,” because the room is not meant to supplant the students’ general education. It does, however, need to be staffed by a licensed professional with specific expertise in designing instruction for the profiles served (for example, ASD or low-incidence disabilities). The Vermont I-team can support the development of such a model, and in fact components of this have already been proposed by TRSU’s I-team consultant.

- Therapeutic Milieu: In this model, the classroom becomes a general education classroom, specifically designed around the therapeutic *and* academic needs of its students. In this case, it would need to be staffed by an appropriately licensed (for all content areas delivered) *general education teacher*, with specific training and expertise in teaching students with challenging social emotional learning needs. In this classroom, students would receive their academic instruction from the teacher in the room, and the classroom would be universally designed around student needs. Teams would identify key reintegration goals so that the students are working toward potential movement back into the general education environment when appropriate (see below)

Note: This model, in particular, requires that the classroom be designed around a specific developmental grade span, and illustrates why a classroom cannot be a “catchall” for large grade spans if it is intended to provide general education first instruction. For example, a classroom can be designed around middle school curriculum and reasonably serve students in grades 6-8, but should not attempt to serve K-8 or even K-6.

- *Common expectations for the facilitation of appropriate reintegration (e.g., “exit criteria”)*

All students can work toward independent demonstration of skills for success in a more typical environment. Often, just identifying what is needed (and being required to report on progress) can ensure that the team pays attention to the student’s readiness for a different setting.

This consultant is aware that the alternative programs currently operating have students enrolled in them, and therefore freeing up the time and space to thoughtfully redesign them is challenging.

However, until there is significant investment in their design, these programs will fail to meet the needs of the students they are intended to serve.

Conclusion

While this review highlights a number of areas for improvement within special education, it also presents a roadmap for meaningful change. The recommendations offered reflect TRSU's commitment to equity and excellence. With sustained effort, collaboration, and a focus on student-centered practices, the future of special education holds great promise. By acting on these insights, TRSU educators and leaders can ensure that every learner is supported, valued, and empowered to reach their full potential.

Appendix A: Summary Recommendations

Finding	Recommendations
Complex governance structures impact unity of decision making overall, and particularly in special education	<i>Develop and refine district-wide special education leadership structures:</i> 1. Expand the formal and informal collaboration between the curriculum and special education directors 2. Consider a redesign of special education leadership to create the capacity for sustained focus on instructional practices
TRSU lacks a strong <u>instructional vision</u> for special education services, resulting in inconsistent implementation of evidence-based practices	<i>Develop a clear understanding of high leverage instructional practices for students with disabilities, and design a comprehensive service delivery model around those practices</i> 1. Develop concrete guidelines for the appropriate role of paraprofessionals within the system 2. Provide system-wide professional development for classroom teachers on the basic components of universal design 3. Ensure the conditions exist for collaboration to occur in each building
TRSU does not have a consistent and coherent methodology for special educator assignment and role definition (e.g., service delivery model)	
Core instruction lacks the capacity to meet most needs of most learners	<i>Further analyze the capacity of the general education system</i>
TRSU has inconsistencies in how it designs, assigns students to, and runs alternative educational programming	<i>Consider short- and longer-term redesign of TRSU alternative programs, including:</i> 1. A data-based determination of what the district requires for alternative programming 2. Identification of clear disability categories and learning profiles served for each program 3. A determination as to how the programs will ensure access to grade level instruction 4. Common expectations for facilitation of appropriate reintegration



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Revised 424942-14643-14546-74424-114424-94426; 5/31/26

Adapted from Best Practice Measures for Teaching Learners with Intensive Needs: Lesson Observation & Document Audit Matrix (ISN LODAM) (2005)
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Revised: ~~4/24/12~~, ~~4/16/13~~, ~~4/15/16~~, ~~7/11/24~~, ~~11/11/24~~, ~~9/11/25~~, 5/31/26

Adapted from Best Practice Measures for Teaching Learners with Intensive Needs: Lesson Observation & Document Audit Matrix (ISN LODAM) (2005)
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