

Intermediate District 287

RESPONSIVE. INNOVATIVE. SOLUTIONS.

A TIPPING POINT

Fundamental Shifts in Students' Needs Require Collective Attention and Action

Since 2004, an increasing number of youth who exhibit severe and dangerous (e.g. biting, hitting, sexual aggression) behaviors are being served in the public schools. Combined with razor thin resources and a growing cross-subsidy, this issue requires our collective attention and action.

Trends

Several factors are driving this trend, including statewide cuts to health and human services. In Hennepin County alone, there was a one-third reduction in the number of youth placed in residential treatment, foster care and corrections between 2008 and 2009. Long-term residential mental health treatment placements funded by Hennepin County decreased by almost 40% during the same period.

The level of need for these services did not vanish by one-third in a single year. Rather, youth who previously received a much higher level of service from the County, and thus level of funding supported by the County, are now being served by the K-12 public school system.

The needs of these young people far exceed what public schools are currently designed or funded to meet. Ever since IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) was passed in 1975 and not fully funded, public schools have handled a cross-subsidy that has mushroomed over time.

By attempting to provide yet another level of unfunded services for young people, services that transcend the typical perception of "special education," public schools are at a tipping point.

Cost Drivers

- The severity of students' needs and diminished level of County services are driving costs in the public schools.
 - For example, among about 500 special education staff, Intermediate District 287 has reported 128 staff injuries over a seven-month period as the result of a student interaction. This result in the need for increased staff training and higher workers comp insurance costs. Between FY08 and FY12, workers comp premiums have increased by 104%.
- This is placing District 287 in the untenable position of upholding both student and employee rights when those rights are in conflict with one another.
 - It is difficult to serve the students with their extensive special education rights while safeguarding employee rights to a safe work environment. For example, sometimes a student's behavior meets the legal definition for sexual harassment or assault, yet the student has the right to an education and the staff person has the right to a safe work environment.
- Member district special education teams are increasingly choosing multi-categorical programs, such as SUN (Students with Unique Needs) to address students' needs.
 - SUN serves students who have intense behavioral needs along with significant cognitive disabilities and other conditions such as autism, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, anxiety and mental health needs.

- Almost 25 percent of District 287's special education students are currently enrolled in programs such as SUN. This group has more than doubled in the past five years.
 - Due to the number of highly trained staff needed to ensure safety for all involved, costs to provide services to students in multi-categorical programs with such severe behavioral disorders can easily exceed \$50,000 per student per school year regardless of whether the service is provided in a student's home district or an intermediate district. As a result, the cross-subsidy from general education to special education is growing right along with the level of students' needs.

Cost of Intermediate District 287 Services

Changes in member districts' cost for services over the past five years can be traced in large part to a growing frequency and intensity of significant student behaviors. Student needs have risen sharply, along with the services needed to support them.

These are huge challenges for public education and compound the issue of other unfunded mandates. In the face of these challenges, Intermediate District 287 has repeatedly contained costs. Yet, cost containment alone within the current special education funding structure is inadequate under the weight of an already existing huge cross-subsidy.

District 287's Efforts to Contain Costs, Capture Revenue

Intermediate District 287's budget, like many of its member school districts, has remained virtually flat for three years. The District has taken the following steps to maximize existing resources and increase efficiencies.

- Reduced expenses by 8.5 percent or \$6 million through a combination of cuts and increased efficiencies between 2008 and 2010.
- Negotiated teacher contracts that are in line with the mid-range of member districts' contracts (per Springsted Study currently underway).
- Increased class size in special education every year since 2004.
- Downsized from 17 to 11 owned or leased sites since 2008, reducing operational costs and increasing staffing efficiencies.
- Anticipate savings of an estimated \$30 million in interest on North Education Center through special bonding authority.
- Refinanced existing facilities debt, resulting in over \$300,000 savings per year starting in FY10.
- Completed more Application for Educational Benefits forms (free/reduced price meals), netting an additional \$655,300 in FY11.
- Captured more than \$1.2 million in Medical Assistance revenue in each of the last three years.

Collective Attention and Action

Intermediate District 287 and member districts have worked hard to make the most of limited resources. The current climate requires we explore innovative approaches to shared services that go beyond mere efficiencies.

We must initiate a discussion at the legislative level. The shift in severity of students' needs is driving costs in a dramatic way that impacts our overall ability to provide an adequate education for all of our students. The profound nature of our current challenge requires our collective attention and action.