

Managing Special Education Costs

10 Strategies for Maximizing Resources



Making the difference
that matters most

Top 10 Tips

Discover A Better Way Forward

Today's expectations for progress and performance in special education are higher than ever. School leaders are under increasing pressure to do things differently to meet new challenges. Developing efficient and effective programs for students with educational disabilities now takes more than simply following policies and procedures: It demands results-driven best practices and specialized skills. On the following pages are 10 strategies for meeting this complex challenge, while also keeping costs in check.

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1. Preventing the need for special education must be a priority

- Ensure strong reading and language instruction Pre Kindergarten-grade 3 (and beyond) to prevent gaps in reading and language achievement. Establish an expectation that students read at grade level by the end of grade 3, and continue reading instruction as long as necessary to ensure students meet reading standards.
- Establish clear performance benchmarks for students and monitor learning performance with increasing frequency and intensity for students not meeting standards. (For example, monitor progress every three weeks for younger children with learning gaps so extra instruction and support can be added to accelerate learning).
- Learn about Response to Intervention (RtI) best practices and use the process to intervene with general education resources (speech improvement, reading support, extended school day, summer reading.) Adjust programs that are not demonstrating results in student performance.
- Closely monitor the results of general education interventions over time. Adjust programs that are not demonstrating results by focusing on quality curriculum, extra instruction to close achievement gaps, and rapid intervention to prevent failure.
- Closely monitor the results of Title I intervention and Academic Intervention Services (AIS) intervention programs. Study performance of AIS and Title I services carefully to track results of interventions and programs over time. It is not cost-effective to provide more of the same service if it is not working. RtI applies to students with disabilities (SWD) before increasing or adding services or more restrictive programs.

2. Influence the special education budget by focusing on the results of intervention and programs

- One core purpose of special education is to provide the support necessary to close achievement gaps so that students with disabilities may reach New York State standards. While Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are developed annually, the required quarterly reports provide rich information about the quality of programs and services in closing achievement gaps. Individual student data and program evaluation data must be reviewed thoroughly. When program evaluations are viewed collectively over time, data emerge about the effectiveness of individual programs and services on student performance.
- Special education programs and services can be improved using the same processes that are used in general education programs. As a superintendent, you can gather special education data from a programmatic level and direct the improvement and results of programs. Conduct program evaluations to inform short and long-term strategic improvement plans.
- Information related to program effectiveness needs to be reviewed and analyzed annually during the School District's program performance review cycle. (Comprehensive District Education Plan (CDEP) or other process). Adjustments to curriculum, instructional strategies, teacher training, and professional practice can yield significant improvements in student performance.
- Gather Placement and Services projections in December and monitor monthly to manage fiscal trends.

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- Include the special education administrators and Committee on Special Education (CSE) Chairs in the budget development cycle and process by having them “project” programs, services and placements by student. Identify the students individually who will require more services, or less services, and those that require the same level of service. Review this from a systems-level perspective. It will give a sense of the percentage of students making progress and percentage of students that are not. Since the information is available to you in December, you can request plans be put in place to improve results for any student who is not making adequate progress. You can also compare “predicted” placement results against “actual” placements made by the CSE at the end of the annual review cycle.
- Chart Personnel Employed or Contracted to Provide Special Education and Related Services to Students with Disabilities (PD) data over time (classification, declassification, placement, student performance, and fiscal).
- Ensure clear 1:1 aide criteria and track monthly.
- Make certain fiscal monitoring, reporting, System to Track and Account for Children (STAC) process is reviewed monthly by Business Official and Special Education Director.

3. *Monitor the annual review cycle for fiscal impact and student performance results.*

- Make certain that Special Education is not the only way for students and parents to get help – focus on quality prevention and intervention. Track special education referral rates by grade level/school. Also, track transfer rates by grade, school, and placement.

4. *Annual reviews: Discussion of student performance and planning for upcoming school year.*

- While these meetings may take place throughout the school year in some districts, the transition from one grade level, school or program to another could have significant impact on finances, staffing, equipment, etc. As the CSE make these important decisions, it is imperative that there is an adequate and accurate process for the financial and staffing implications to be conveyed to the central administration. In addition, it is important to carefully look at Regents exams and course completion rates annually.
- Check schedules, caseloads of speech therapists, psychologists, counselors, and other related service providers, and consider the impact of coordinated services on student achievement. Monitor performance outcomes and service delivery carefully.
- Provide for building principals, special education directors, master schedulers, and CSE chairs to work together to develop cost-effective and instructionally sound programs.

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5. Extended School Year (ESY)

Students with disabilities may require Extended School Year services through the summer. These recommendations and costs must be tracked over time. Consider providing summer reading and math intervention programs jointly with Title I.

6. Out-of-district placements

While placements out of the school district have varied economic impact on the district, the personnel impact could be significant. A student being placed out of district may bring about an opportunity to reduce staff in district if extensive services had been provided in a district school. Conversely, a student entering the school district from an out of district placement or another district could require additional staff or the redeployment of existing staff. Keep track of projected student placements and caseloads through monthly tracking devices.

7. Transportation

Special school transportation as a related service may be prescribed in a student's Individual Education program (IEP). Should special transportation be required for a student with mobility needs or significant medical or behavior needs, a specialized vehicle, or additional supervision could be required with significant budget impact. Ensure an adequate tracking system and coordinated communications between the CSE program office and Business office.

8. Anticipate costs

The need for sound systems, computers, special furniture, or other special equipment as prescribed by the CSE in the IEP could require unanticipated purchases for the upcoming school year. Make certain that the cost of such equipment is considered as it relates to aid.

9. Student referral and assessment

Track referrals for testing and CSE meetings by month and by grade level. Monitor these systems carefully to identify patterns and to help inform the potential need for stronger prevention programs.

10. State aid

Expenditures made for special education services may be recouped but not from one primary source of state aid because there is no comprehensive formula. Some of the costs to educate a special education student are absorbed into the foundation formula, or the high cost aid. The cost of providing services to students that reside in the district, and that are not high cost (services do not exceed three times the cost of general education student) are generally absorbed in the foundation aid formula. The cost of providing services to a high cost student can be offset through high cost aid. Placement of a student out of district, or out-of-state is eligible for aid, provided the district places the student in an SED approved facility, and receives approval from SED to receive aid for the placement. It is important to note that the district can only recoup the cost of direct services required by the IEP. The administrative costs (i.e. salary for CSE Chair, Principal, supplies and material) will not be recouped through state aid.