

**A REPORT ON EFFORTS TO STIMULATE  
REGIONAL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES IN  
SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IN MAINE**

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In 2002 a Working Group on Special Education Issues was convened by the Maine State Board of Education to develop a new funding model for special education services that promoted equity, allowed for the projection and control of costs, and was based on the Essential Programs and Services model. However, in its deliberations the Working Group found that program issues in special education deserved as much, if not more attention as funding issues. While the rising cost of special education was a significant concern to policymakers, prevalence data indicated that significant challenges existed in how students with disabilities were being identified and served. Maine had the fourth highest prevalence of students with disabilities in the U. S., and there was wide variance in the prevalence of students with disabilities across Maine school districts. It was apparent to the Working Group that finance and program issues in special education were closely intertwined and that changes in each of these areas was essential.

In its report to the State Board of Education in June 2003, the Working Group presented nine recommendations for both program and finance reform (Maine Education Policy Research Institute, June 2003). Among the recommendations for program reform was recommendation #8:

The State Board of Education should examine the regional delivery of special education services that exists among some Maine school districts to determine the levels of adequacy and cost of these services and the degree to which they support the concept of equity in service delivery to students with disabilities. Many other states provide special education funding through regional cooperatives that are created specifically for the provision of special education services.

The State Board of Education's response to this recommendation was to request that the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) explore the current status of

regional services to students with disabilities in Maine and identify opportunities for the creation of regional service delivery systems. This report describes the activities of MEPRI related to this charge and briefly describes the goals and accomplishments made in three regional groups to which the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) provided funds to stimulate the development of regional special education programs and services.

### **Determining the Existing Status of Regional Efforts**

On January 29, 2004 the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC) assisted MEPRI by e-mailing a survey to its membership of approximately 200. The survey requested information about existing efforts of two or more school districts to share special education programs or services. It also requested information about the need for such services. By February 14th only 35 responses had been received which placed severe limits on the value of the information received and any conclusions that might be drawn. However, within the limited sample of responses there was a high level of agreement that regional special education programs were viewed as desirable for providing the following:

- Ready access to specialists such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech/language therapists, social workers, field supervisors, and home school coordinators
- Assessment services and three-year evaluations
- Programs for students with low incidence severe disabilities such as autism, emotional disabilities, dually diagnosed students (MR/ED), students who are physical dangers to themselves and others, and alternative programs for high-risk students
- Professional development for special education teachers and education technicians

Several respondents also cautioned that regional programs and services must not take students with disabilities away from their local communities or conflict with the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

The small return rate of the Director's survey prompted MEPRI staff to engage in discussions with regional groups of superintendents and directors of special education about types of special education programs and services that might be offered on a regional basis and the positive and negative aspects of regional programs. Between March and April 2004, MEPRI staff met with eight different regional groups. Each group was presented with local and regional special education prevalence and expenditure data.

These discussions revealed that some cooperative agreements existed among regional school administrative units (SAUs) related to occasional professional development, efficiencies in transportation, and coordinating the services of private *service* providers who offered assessment and therapeutic services. Discussions also brought to the attention of SAU administrators that prevalence and expenditures for similar services varied widely among SAUs. These data provided significant reasons to consider developing regional special education services and programs in all regions, including finding cost efficiencies in hiring *scare* personnel such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychologists, and speech/language pathologists; meeting the educational and service needs of students with low-incidence disabilities; and using common standards and criteria for the identification of disabilities. However, only four regions—Hancock County, Cumberland County, the PREP region (Penobscot River

Educational Partnership), and Central Kennebec—demonstrated interest in developing specific plans for regionalization in special education.

### **MDOE Offers Support**

In April of 2004, MDOE solicited proposals from SAUs for the implementation of regional programs or services in special education. Grants of \$75,000 were awarded to the PREP region, Hancock County, and the Central Kennebec region with the expectation of a \$75,000 match. Each region was expected to develop a plan for regionalization of special education programs or services that would be cost efficient and be implemented by January 1, 2005. In addition, each region was to pilot a new pre-referral process (Response to Intervention) and guidelines for determining eligibility for special education. This report is limited primarily to regionalization efforts. Other activities related to the MDOE funding and for which information is available are also described.

The sections which follow describe the progress made in each of the three pilot sites.

*The PREP Region.* The PREP region consists of the SAUs in Old Town, Brewer, Bucksport, Union 89 (Orono and Veazie), MSAD 22 (Hampden, Winterport, Newburg), Union 90 (Alton, Milford, and Bradley), Union 91 (Orrington and Orland), the United Technologies Center, the Indian Island School and the University of Maine and has existed since 1999. PREP is a collaborative of SAUs with the University of Maine dedicated to developing the capacity of member organizations to increase the quality of teaching and learning. PREP activities are coordinated by a part-time executive director

who reports to an executive committee of superintendents who represent participating school districts deans from the University of Maine.

### GOALS

PREP's application for MDOE funds specified the following goals:

- Develop a regional center for the provision of student assessment, consultation to schools and related services, and professional development by regional center staff
- Develop a unified pre-referral process which will ensure that regular education initiatives are consistently implemented prior to referral for special education

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- During 2004-2005, PREP school districts collaborated to jointly secure psychological services to provide 120 school-based evaluations and 20 neuropsychological evaluations. Contracts were developed with two distinct providers and services were successfully secured. Costs were \$10 to \$20 less per hour than the cost available to school units prior to this collaboration.
- During the 2005-2006 school year, PREP school districts collaborated on the direct hiring of a full-time psychologist, a certified psychological service provider, a full-time speech therapist, and a half-time speech therapist. These individuals will begin work in September 2006. Direct hiring will result in a savings of \$146,000 to the participating school districts in 2006-2007.
- PREP provided regional professional development to grade 1 teachers on the administration and scoring of the observational survey and on developing instructional practices based on the resulting data.
- PREP developed a leadership team comprised of members from each district to:
  - Develop a common understanding of Response to Intervention
  - Provide staff development to develop a framework for the initiative
  - Plan and implement a Response to Intervention institute in August 2006 for K-1 teachers to support implementation in reading in 2006-2007
- PREP developed a computer database to organize data resulting from the Response to Intervention initiative for later analysis

*Hancock County Region.* The Hancock County region, for purposes of this project, consists of Ellsworth, Unions 76 (Brooklin and Sedgwick), 91 (Orland and Orrington), 92 (Hancock, Lamoine, Mariaville, Surry, and Trenton), 93 (Brooksville,

Blue Hill, Castine, and Penobscot), Union 96 (Winter Harbor and Steuben) and 98 (Bar Harbor, Cranberry Isles, Frenchboro, Mt. Desert, Southwest Harbor, and Tremont).

### GOALS

This region proposed the creation of a regional special education resource center to assist participating school districts in providing quality assessment, consultation, and direct services in a more cost effective manner. Proposed strategies included the employment of a psychologist, occupational, therapist, physical therapist, speech/language pathologist, collaborative professional development for special education personnel, and a general sharing of resources. Specific goals of this group included the following:

- Development of a method of ensuring that special education evaluations are completed within the timeline required by Chapter 101
- Providing special education support services in a cost-effective manner
- Developing a cost-effective method of providing professional development

### ACCOMPLISHMENTS

This project caused the superintendents and special education directors in the region to closely examine the prevalence and cost of special education services, especially costs related to assessments. A director was hired in the fall of 2004 to explore possibilities for regional services but resigned in May of 2005 due to illness. However, the following accomplishments can be attributed to the project:

- Bucksport, Blue Hill, and the schools in Union 76 are using SPEDNET, a database for special education data.
- A close examination of special education costs revealed that a special education resource center would not be practical. Larger districts in this region hire their own specialists while the need for assessment and therapeutic services in smaller districts was not sufficient to warrant the collaborative employment of specialists on a full-time basis with the exception of Union 76. Union 76 is currently seeking to hire a speech and language pathologist and an occupational therapist.
- Union 76 has established an exclusive contract for neuropsychological evaluations. Although this will not reduce costs, it will give the schools within Union 76 a priority status and help ensure that evaluations are completed on time.
- A pre-referral process, Response to Intervention, was the focus of regional training in January 2005 and a common procedures form was adopted. Although adoption of RTI has not been 100%, it is being planned or initiated in some form in Mt. Desert, Union 76, Ellsworth, Blue Hill, and Bucksport.

*The Central Kennebec Region.* The Central Kennebec region consists of Waterville, Winslow, and MSAD 47 (Belgrade, Oakland, and Sidney). These SAUs had

been previously involved in exploring consolidation and regionalization efforts. As the 2004 school year began, the three systems had one regional administrator for food service and one supervisor of transportation for both Waterville and MSAD 47.

Finding efficiencies in the delivery of special education programs and services was a natural next item on their agenda.

### **GOALS**

The Central Kennebec region requested funds to hire a full-time consultant to develop a framework for implementing a regional special education program during the 2004-2005 academic year. This planning would lay the groundwork for hiring a regional special education director in 2005-2006. Among the responsibilities of the regional special education director beginning in 2005-2006 would be the following:

- Developing common pre-referral and referral processes
- Developing quality alternative education programs
- Increasing the accuracy of identification strategies
- Sharing the expertise of personnel across districts
- Developing programs for students with low-incidence disabilities
- Developing a regional day-treatment program
- Bargain more effectively with service providers
- Develop a regional assessment system

### **ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

The Central Kennebec region hired a full-time special education researcher during 2004-2005 who presented recommendations to the leadership of all three SAUs in May of 2005. These recommendations resulted in the following accomplishments:

- Piloting of a distributed leadership model of special education in MSAD 47. This model distributed special education administration responsibilities among four individuals. Although ultimate authority was maintained by the special education director, the convening of PETs and serving as the district's official administrative representative were responsibilities delegated to three other people. This model increased principals' access to special education personnel, relieved principals of the responsibility for chairing PETs and taking notes allowing them the opportunity to participate more freely in PET meetings, and allowed time for increased professional development opportunities for all members of this special education team.
- Development of plans for a regional day-treatment program for high school students in Winslow, a regional program for students with multiple disabilities in Waterville, and a program for students with autistic-spectrum disorders in MSAD 47. Committees developed plans for each of these programs between September 2005 and February 2006. Plans were reviewed and accepted by the regional superintendents; however, implementation was delayed until September 2007 due to space and staffing limitations. Recently, (June 2006) space became available in



Waterville and plans for implementing a program for students with autistic-spectrum disorders are being considered.

- Piloting a pre-referral process, Response to Intervention, occurred in Winslow.

In addition to these accomplishments, the Central Kennebec region piloted SPEDNET, a database for organizing special education data. The region reported that . . . “factors such as timing, resources, misunderstandings, communication gaps, the inability to get MEDMS numbers for all students, the incompleteness of the SPEDNET database until the project was nearly half over, and other factors led SPEDNET not proving to be viable in the Central Kennebec region at the time.”

### Summary

An effort to determine the extent of regional service delivery of special education programs in the winter of 2004 was inconclusive due to a low response rate. However, the limited responses suggested that a regional approach to employing certain specialists, providing programs for students with low-incidence disabilities, and for providing professional development were viewed as lacking but desirable.

In June 2004 MDOE provided \$75,000 grants to three regions each consisting of multiple school administrative units to support regional goals related to the provision of special education programs and services. In addition, all three regions were asked to pilot Response to Intervention (a pre-referral process that could reduce special education referrals) and SPEDNET (a special education database).

At this writing, June 2006, all three regions have addressed their initial goals. An analysis of their progress since June 2004 reveals the following accomplishments or pending accomplishments that might potentially reduce costs and maintain or improve the quality of special education services:

- The distributed special education administration model in MSAD 47. This pilot project suggests that special education leadership and administration might be

done more efficiently and effectively across a region when responsibilities are delegated among knowledgeable and skilled individuals,

- The potential for a regional program for students with low-incidence disabilities in Waterville. The increase in the prevalence of young students with autistic-spectrum disorders and the recent possibility of available space in Waterville may prompt the implementation of a program that will meet the needs of the Central Kennebec region.
- The agreement of school administrative units within the PREP region to jointly employ a psychologist and occupational therapist in 2006-2007 is clearly an effort to control costs and the work schedule of these roles. Union 76 in the Hancock County region has a similar plan.
- Professional development is planned or has been implemented by all three regions with a specific focus on Response to Intervention. It is too early to determine the impact that this pre-referral practice will have on special education referrals.

### **Other Observations**

Efforts to develop regional special education programs or services have a greater chance of succeeding when clear leadership is provided and a history of cooperative or collaborative work already exists. Such efforts were well underway in the PREP and Central Kennebec regions prior to the initiation of this project in the summer of 2004. PREP, with the leadership of a part-time executive director, was beginning to mature as a partnership dedicated to regional professional development. The focus on finding efficiencies and increasing the quality of special education programs and services through

regional efforts was a reasonable task for this well-organized collaborative that had learned the value of collaboration over many years.

The Central Kennebec region had three superintendents who had been meeting consistently to discuss topics of regionalization and had already found efficiencies food services and transportation. Finding a more efficient way of providing special education programs and services was already on the agenda of this group when the task was presented.

Although this sample of three regions is not truly representative of all school administrative units in Maine, it appears that the concept of regional special education programs and services might be more feasible when centered on more densely populated areas and smaller geographic regions. The Central Kennebec region consists of three SAUs and there are eight SAUs in the PREP region. Less progress was made in the Hancock County region, perhaps due to the vast territory covered by these SAUs which include 19 municipalities represented in one independently supervised school district and six school unions.

Finally, it is also apparent from this limited sample that the creation of regional special education programs takes time. Two years have past since funding was provided, and tangible results in the form of the regional employment of specialists, regional programs for students with low-incidence disabilities, and professional development and implementation of Response to Intervention should become evident in 2006-2007. The impact of these efforts on the quality and efficiency of special education programs and services is still to be determined.

## Reference

Maine Education Policy Research Institute. (2003). *A proposal for special education program and finance reform in Maine*. Orono, ME, University of Maine, Author.