

RSU9 Office of Special Services Board Update - April 4 ,2024

Our District Special Services Team:

Director	John S. Jones
Assistant Director -	Cynthia Bernstein
Administrative Assistant	BJ Tracy
School Psychologist	Christine Gatto-Shea
BCBA	Jeannie Ruther
PreK - 5 Coordinator	Cheryl Webster
Grade 6-Age 22 Coordinator	Mike Hanson

As RSU 9 nears the end of the third quarter of school for the 23-24 school year we want to share with you our efforts to meet the needs of students with disabilities across grade levels. Enclosed with this report you will find updated information regarding district demographic data, program development and ongoing efforts of the Special Services Department, as well as new and continued challenges the department is facing.

We're reporting to you deep in the middle of "referral season". At this time of year teachers have applied general education interventions, worked to increase the skills of their students and considering for some students, the value in the consideration of a disability possibly impacting performance. Referrals are often made at this time when data from these interventions inform teachers that a student isn't responding as expected. This year the number of referrals has been almost twice as many as in years past, consistent with national trends. Explanations for this in our district range from the implementation of a more detailed and specific referral form, professional development on the referral process and collaborative discussions with interventionists around evidence based practices for students who are lagging in literacy or math.

I do want to thank our collective staff of general and special educators and all of our support staff, related service providers, central office staff and community partners in helping to maintain and sustain services for students with disabilities throughout the school year. While the pandemic has abated, determining the lasting effects of the instructional loss and social opportunities continues to be challenging and may indeed be reflected in our high referral rates.

Staffing - The labor force remains a challenge both here and throughout Maine and felt acutely in K-12 education across the country as shifting economic realities have forced families and individuals to consider opportunities that may meet their needs more successfully. Educators are no less susceptible. Competition for staff has added to the shifting labor pool for all school districts and although we have been able to attract and retain a number of new team members, some key positions remain vacant or filled with substitutes. It is worth noting that in many instances, Educational Technicians have stepped up to assume more responsibilities as we work through the recruitment and hiring processes.

Teaching and Related Service Provider Vacancies:

	<u>10/24/23</u>	<u>3/26/24</u>
K-5 teachers	0	0
6-8 teachers	1	1
9-12 teachers	3 (2 LTS in Day Treatment and 1 in Adaptive Skills)	3
School Psychologists	1 (+ contracted services)	1
Speech Pathologists	0 (+ contracted services)	0

Social Workers	0	1
BCBA	0	0

Please note that we do contract with an outside agency for school psychologist work yet continue to seek another school psychologist for our district. Next year we are looking to retain one of our current school psychologist interns in his program. We also have a sizable contract with Presence Learning (online platform) to address speech and language needs across the district while still having a team of 3 experienced SLPs on staff. We will post for a speech/language pathologist this spring to hopefully capture an on site provider. We have brought on board a new physical therapist, Mary Ellis, who began working with us in December, 2023. She has been a terrific addition to our related services team.

Educational Technicians - Over the course of the year we have onboarded new educational technicians yet unfortunately, some have also left us. At this time we have 9 open positions with 3 filled with long term subs. While vacancies remain in key programs we are hopeful that as graduation dates near for universities, so will the applications.

Facts and Figures Updates of Note - Currently identified students with disabilities in RSU 9 = 399 with 53 students currently in the referral process to determine eligibility (presence of a disability + adverse impact upon educational performance + need for special education services). Of the 399 students identified with disabilities and currently receiving services, the disabilities represented are broken down here:

Autism - 62 , Emotional Disturbance - 33, Intellectual Disability - 16, Multiple Dis - 37, Orthopedic Impairment - 1, Other Health Impairment - 66, Specific Learning Disability - 116, Speech and Language Disability - 62.

Professional Growth and Development Opportunity highlights:

Mentoring and targeted coaching = Continues with our coordinators, directors and contracted consultants. All new teachers are connected with seasoned professionals to support them through the early stages of professional growth.

Specialized Literacy Instruction = Teachers continue to be able to access SPIRE training and we are hoping to broaden LiPS training (a Lindamood-Bell sponsored program focusing on phonemic awareness and sound-symbol mapping). Our department supports such evidence based approaches to address lagging literacy skills.

Eastern Maine Community College Learning Facilitator Program = A MDOE and MCCS Workforce Development Program supporting Ed Tech professional development. Four current Educational Technicians completed this program last year. Six ed techs are participating this year and two others are enrolling for upcoming cohorts. and 3 are enrolled to date. This helps to increase their skills and certification levels and ultimately brings additional skill sets to our classrooms and students.

Safety Care training = This intervention program, mandated by law, continues throughout the school year to insure our staff respond effectively and least restrictively to challenging behaviors. With new specialist training we have more than 85 specialists at this time.

UMF collaborations = The Office of Special Services continues to access UMF resources in an effort to improve our collaborations and access support for our staff. Most notably, UMF professor Brianna Grumpstrup continues to offer professional growth experiences for our Adaptive Skills teachers through the use of a tool

known as the Autism and Low Incidence Classroom Observation Tool (ALCOT) developed by University of North Carolina professor Robert Pennington. This is an exciting process designed to support the implementation of high leverage practices of instruction and intervention.

American Speech/Language and Hearing Association Award goes to Victoria Petersen, Speech/Language Pathologist - At the November, 2023 ASHA annual conference in Boston, MA this year Victoria Petersen earned the Award for Continuing Education (ACE) for completing 70 contact hours of professional development in a three year period. Congratulations Victoria on this achievement, that also has a direct impact on students!

Unified Basketball Season is in the books! - The Mt Blue Unified Basketball Team just finished their second season. The team has grown and the games are well attended. This year the team had student announcers to [call the play by play](#). We're looking forward to another successful season next year!

Lilly Cheimis, teacher in the Cushing Autism Program - Took a field trip to the Wilton Play Museum in December! The museum worked with our team to be available for our young students and offer them a wonderful exploratory experience!

Laurel Dingley, Lynda Szenes and Will Doray, High School Adaptive Skills Program teachers - Worked with Mr. John Moore of Railroad Cinema in Farmington, who kindly donated a viewing of "Wonka" for the class in December. In addition, the students went to Subway to practice ordering and paying for their lunches. These real world experiences are the bridge from learning in school to learning in the community. Thank you to Mr. Moore for supporting our students and program! Additionally, a number of students will be participating in the Youth Summit in South Portland at the end of the month in an effort to develop self advocacy and determination skills along with community service and post-secondary planning.

Moving forward: The Office of Special Services will continue to collaborate with statewide and community partners in the following ways that the board may help with:

- Expand our offerings of Professional Development activities.
- Establish Unified Basketball at MBHS for the 32nd year!
- Continue with our Special Services Advisory Committee
- Continue to develop inclusionary practices and approaches to student experiences both in and out of the classroom.
- Increase student engagement in IEP development
- Strengthen Transition Planning procedures and activities
- Provide supplemental instructional services and opportunities via our ESSER grant
- Celebrate and recognize the great work being done by our staff
- Support ongoing Professional Growth and Development activities
- Expand the PEERS model to MBMS.
- Ensure that the education of students with disabilities is considered in all aspects of RSU9's Strategic +planning.

Challenges remain with staffing vacancies in some key areas yet our entire staff have supported each other in numerous ways to ensure that any disruptions to student instruction and support are minimized. We continue to seek ways to recruit and retain staff in all of our Special Services programs. Special thanks goes to all staff who have helped with sudden, needed adjustments.

Thank you for your ongoing support of students with disabilities in RSU 9!