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CONNECTICUT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
Hartford

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education

DATE: May 7, 2025

SUBJECT: Hartford Public Schools Fiscal Operations
New Solutions K-12 Review Executive Summary of the Final Findings Report

Executive Summary

On June 5, 2024, pursuant to Section 10-223e(e)(2) of the Connecticut General Statues, the State Board of Education (SBE) directed the Commissioner of Education to take the necessary action to implement, on behalf of the SBE, the powers set forth in Section 10-223e to ensure the fiscal operations of Hartford Public Schools (HPS). This included a three-prong approach including: (i) Magnet School Assessment: optimizing Funds Utilization; (ii) Special Education Services Assessment; and (iii) Improvement of Financial Systems.

Immediate action was taken in partnering with the State Education Resource Center and ultimately engaged with New Solutions K-12 to facilitate a comprehensive special education review with a focus on HPS staffing, recruitment and retention practices, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) programming, and the placement process resulting in students being placed in out of district special education programs.

New Solutions K-12 presented its preliminary findings to the SBE on January 15, 2025, and the Commissioner has provided the SBE with regular updates on progress. New Solutions K-12 has completed its review and published findings and recommendations in the final report which is attached for the review of the SBE.

Hartford Public Schools is currently in the 2025-2026 monitoring cycle by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) which includes, Annual Performance Reporting, Individualized Education Program (IEP) timeline audit, Parent Survey, and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Grant monitoring. Given the findings of New Solutions K-12 and the significant concerns regarding the systemic issues impacting the ability of HPS to provide special education services to identified students, the CSDE will intensify our support and targeted monitoring activities within the district. This will include, but not be limited to, comprehensive parent interviews, detailed verification of IEP service implementation, and robust onsite program reviews focused on both compliance and quality of services. Additionally, the CSDE will assume an enhanced role in overseeing HPS' implementation of New Solutions K-12's recommendations, ensuring accountability at every stage and sustaining a close watch on measurable progress. This level of engagement reflects the urgency and seriousness of the identified issues and our commitment to ensuring that all students receive the services and support to which they are entitled.

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Executive Summary

Conducting a Targeted Review of Special Education, Improving Access to LRE, and Improving Special Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Management of Vacancies

Hartford Public Schools

April 2025

New Solutions K12

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Introduction and Purpose

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), in a partnership with the State Education Resource Center (SERC), engaged New Solutions K12 to conduct a systematic study to review Hartford Public School's special education and general education supports and services to help serve students more effectively and in a cost-efficient way. This review had three areas of focus:

- A targeted review of special education in the district.
- An analysis of student access to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and assessing the district's capacity to serve more students with disabilities in-district.
- Assessing special education staffing shortages and the district's systems for improving recruitment, retention, and the management of vacancies.

Many students have struggled since the pandemic, and unfortunately, many struggled before COVID as well. Districts are challenged to address learning loss and trauma. The district has much to be proud of, and like all districts, there is still more to do.

In all cases, the review recognizes that increasing student achievement, meeting the social and emotional needs of students, managing costs, and respecting children, parents, and staff are equally important. Addressing one, while ignoring the others, is not an option.

The systematic study also respects the reality that school systems are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. To that end, only a small number of high-potential, high-impact, and high-leverage opportunities are identified. A short, targeted plan is more beneficial than a long laundry list of observations, options, and possible actions.

New Solutions K12 will work alongside the district and CSDE to review this information and determine the appropriate next steps for implementation and improvement. Not all areas for further consideration listed in the document can be addressed at once. If the district were to pursue any of these areas further, it would typically take 1-3 years of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out, with a commitment from the leadership to provide focus and stability during the implementation process. While change can and should begin quickly, it will take a sustained effort to implement well.

Methodology

The research conducted included extensive in-person and virtual interviews and focus groups, a deep look at hard data, classroom visits, benchmarking against best practices, and a review of existing reports and district documents. Many special education staff also documented and shared their schedules electronically to provide insight into how they spend their time in a typical week.

New Solutions K12 has developed a comprehensive approach for identifying high-impact opportunities to improve services and outcomes for students with disabilities. Multiple analyses and rounds of stakeholder engagement were conducted to examine the services, programs, procedures, schedules, and staffing related to special education, general education, and intervention. All findings outlined in this report are drawn from the research and analysis conducted throughout this process.

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement was an important element of this review. It included two rounds of engagement. The first round of engagement included senior district leaders and building principals with the purpose of forming a preliminary understanding of the district's current strengths and challenges. New Solutions K12 also met with a guiding coalition that included teachers, staff, and leadership from across the district.

In the second round of engagement, New Solutions K12 spoke with general education teachers, special education teachers and staff, related service providers, counselors, psychologists, student engagement specialists, and paraeducators. The purpose of this round was to build a broad and deep understanding of the current strengths and challenges in supporting students who struggle from a wide range of stakeholder groups. Members of the New Solutions 12 team also conducted classroom observations modeled after principal walk throughs across a variety of schools at all levels, including both magnet and traditional schools in the district. A number of follow up interviews were also conducted to address specific questions or issues identified from the initial two rounds of stakeholder engagement.

New Solutions K12 indicated the roles to be included in the stakeholder engagement and the district identified a representative sample of participants, ensuring voices from elementary, middle, and high school stakeholders.

In total, New Solutions K12 spoke with over 130 Hartford Public Schools teachers, staff, and leaders.

Data Analysis

New Solutions K12 reviewed multiple datasets from the district. The datasets for this analysis included both current and historical data points and encompassed a variety of topics, including:

- Academic performance of students
- Student enrollment including enrollment in Open Choice schools
- Student identification rates for special education services
- Enrollment and staffing in substantially separate programming
- Out-of-district placements

- Staffing levels by type of staff and service
- District spending
- Self-reported schedules/use of time from select special education staff

Best Practices

An important element of this review is to compare and contrast current practices to best practices. New Solutions K12 and its leadership have dedicated over two decades to reviewing thousands of educational research studies and have conducted a number of primary research studies for leading educational think tanks and educational foundations including the Fordham Foundation, Center for American Progress, and the American Enterprise Institute. Key research includes:

- Recommendations of the *What Works Clearing House*, a leading source for field-proven best practices and other published studies
- Recommendations of the National Reading Panel and The Science of Reading, the preeminent source for reading instruction, especially for students who struggle academically
- John Hattie's "Visible Learning Effect" size study
- *Six Shifts for Improving Special Education and Other Interventions* (Harvard Education Press, 2020)

A more comprehensive listing of the best practice research is found in the appendix.

Our recommendations also draw upon our experience working with over 250 school districts in 30 states, including many that outperform expectations. Finally, we have visited and studied roughly 100 schools that have dramatically closed the achievement gap.

Summary of Key Findings

The district is full of smart, caring, and hard-working leaders and staff. However, several interconnected challenges continue to slow efforts to dramatically improve supports and outcomes for students with disabilities.

- **Widespread Staffing Shortages:** As of February 13, 2025, the district had 47.5 special education teacher vacancies. They also had teacher vacancies for school psychologists (2.5), school social workers (8.5), and speech language pathologists (12.6)[1]. This severe lack of special education staff has made it difficult to staff specialized classrooms, to manage Open Choice placements, and to provide services.
- **Limited General Education Supports:** During interviews, district and school leaders shared that there are limited supports for students who struggle academically within the general education setting, which exacerbates the problem. Students who require additional interventions that are not readily available are then referred to special education as the only source of extra help, which in turn strains an already short-staffed team of special educators, as noted by the vacancies above.
- **Out-of-District Placements:** Based on enrollment data provided by the district, the district and the Open Choice districts Hartford students attend have a high number of students placed in out-of-district programs, which is often more expensive and limits students' access to the least restrictive environment.
- **Limited Special Education Supports:** Specialized substantially separate programs are currently the primary form of extra support for students with disabilities who struggle academically, which puts additional strain on the short-staffed team of special educators, as noted by the vacancies above.[2] This can further contribute to an increase in out-of-district placements for some students.
- **Limited Influence or Oversight Over Open Choice Special Education Costs:** The district currently has limited involvement in the special education referral, identification, and placement process for students in Open Choice schools, stemming in part from a lack of staffing available to attend these PPT meetings.[3] While these students do not attend Hartford Public Schools, the district is responsible for covering the special education costs for these students.

These interconnected challenges have created a perfect storm, compounding on each other in a vicious cycle. There is a widespread belief in the district that the special education staffing shortage has led to an increase in students being placed out of district, which has caused financial strain, and that more money is needed to solve this. While the special education staffing shortage certainly plays a role in the district's challenges, there are additional factors that need to be considered. For example, current ineffective general education tier 1, 2, and 3 interventions has led to a surge in special education

[1] Vacancy data for school psychologists, school social workers, and speech language pathologists as of 1/31/2025 based on data provided by Hartford Public Schools.
[2] As shared by school and district leaders, teachers, and observed during classroom observations.
[3] As shared by school and district leaders.

referrals and increased identification of students as having a disability. This is then exacerbated by the district's prior decision to greatly reduce support services like special education pull-out programs and traditional special education resource rooms, combined with the growing national trend of rising special education populations. Together, this has placed an immense burden on an already overstretched and understaffed special education workforce.

Efforts to address these challenges are already underway

District leadership is well aware of these challenges and their impact on students and staff and have begun taking steps to address some, but not all of them.

District leadership shared that they have recently rolled out and are supporting the use of a common rigorous core curriculum to bolster tier 1 instruction. They also shared that they recognize the shortcomings of the current support model and have begun rolling out a stronger SRBI/MTSS system with expanded tier 2 and 3 supports. Opportunity 3 in this report goes into this in more detail.

To address the shortage of special education staff, the district has formed partnerships with local universities focused on special education certification, with tuition reimbursement offers for existing staff who wish to be dual-certified in special education.

Additionally, the Hartford Board of Education recently approved a new three-year contract with the Hartford Federation of Teachers in which teachers will get a 15% average salary increase over three years and a shorter workday by 30 minutes. New teachers' salaries will increase between $7,000 and $9,000 starting in school year 2025-2026. This new contract aims to reduce the pay gap between city teachers and their suburban peers, and will bring the district's school day from one of the longest in the area closer to that of surrounding districts.

The district also shared that they have offered monetary bonuses to reward long-term service in the district, to incentivize Hartford Public Schools graduates to return as teachers, and for teachers hired mid-year in the hardest-to-fill certification areas (math, sciences, special education, speech & language pathologist, school psychologist, teacher of the deaf, bilingual, and TESOL).

The district has also made significant progress in reducing the number of out-of-district placements for students in the schools they manage. Out-of-district placements overseen by Hartford PPT teams have decreased from their peak of 587 students in 2019 to 341 students as of the 2023-2024 school year. This represents a 42% reduction and an estimated annual savings of over $20 million. It's likely an even greater reduction would have taken place if the district could have addressed their staffing vacancies to support more students in-district.

However, the district has not as closely managed the special education identification or services for students attending Open Choice schools. Special education services for students in Open Choice schools currently cost the district over $20 million. Opportunity 4 goes into additional detail on this set up and outlines options for serving these students more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Collectively, the opportunities in this report aim to address these challenges by accelerating and strengthening existing efforts rather than creating an entirely new plan.

Important Special Education Fiscal Considerations

Hartford Public Schools, 2023-2024 Special Education expenditures as reported on the EdSight:

District	Description	Amount
Hartford School District	Teacher Salaries	$17,419,609
	Instructional Aide Salaries	$8,857,609
	Other Salaries	$5,024,586
	Employee Benefits	$9,369,879
	Purchased Services Other Than Transportation	$5,958,546
	Special Education Tuition	$86,753,972
	Supplies	$162,013
	Property Services	$1,809
	Purchased Services For Transportation	$23,485,014
	Equipment	$8,731
	All Other Expenditures	$8,539
	Total	$157,050,307

Hartford Public Schools IDEA Grant Award: 611 ages (3-22), 619 ages (3-5)

District Name	Award Year	Grant	Allocation
Hartford School District	2025	IDEA 611 (20977)	$6,829,827.00
Hartford School District	2024	IDEA 611 (20977)	$6,777,958.00
Hartford School District	2025	IDEA 619 (20983)	$233,825.00
Hartford School District	2024	IDEA 619 (20983)	$233,265.00

IDEA 611 Grant Budget Summary:

Budget Summary by Object			
Object Code	Description	FFY 2025	FFY 2024
111A	Non-Instructional Salaries	$677,795.00	$677,795.80
111B	Instructional Salaries	$2,316,191.44	$2,514,284.28
200	Personal Services - Employee Benefits	$573,853.31	$673,557.33
321	Tutors (Instructional, Non-Payroll)	$0.00	$0.00
322	In Service	$0.00	$0.00
323	Pupil Services (Non-Payroll)	$686,723.09	$652,032.06
324	Field Trips	$0.00	$4,546.20
325	Parent Activities	$1,000.00	$500.00
330	Employee Training (Non-Direct Services)	$2,000.00	$20,495.00
340	Other Professional Services	$17,000.00	$127,000.00
341	Audit	$0.00	$0.00
350	Technical Services	$0.00	$0.00
440	Rentals	$0.00	$2,500.00
450	Construction Services	$0.00	$0.00
510	Student Transportation Services	$446,254.00	$446,254.00
530	Communications	$45,131.46	$43,378.00
560	Tuition	$1,842,494.80	$1,249,529.26
580	Travel	$19,580.00	$19,580.00
600	Supplies - Technology/Instructional	$86,670.13	$158,329.44
730	Equipment	$20,000.00	$189.99
734	Technology Related Hardware	$0.00	$17,838.73
735	Technology Software	$0.00	$0.00
800	Debt Service and Miscellaneous	$3,100.00	$7,200.00
917	Indirect Costs	$92,033.77	$162,947.91
	Total	$6,829,827.00	$6,777,958.00

IDEA 619 Grant Budget Summary:

Budget Summary by Object			
Object Code	Description	FFY 2025	FFY 2024
111A	Non-Instructional Salaries	$0.00	$0.00
111B	Instructional Salaries	$63,935.00	$117,718.80
200	Personal Services - Employee Benefits	$24,346.14	$49,380.92
321	Tutors (Instructional, Non-Payroll)	$0.00	$0.00
322	In Service	$0.00	$0.00
323	Pupil Services (Non-Payroll)	$0.00	$0.00
324	Field Trips	$3,000.00	$0.00
325	Parent Activities	$3,000.00	$2,000.00
330	Employee Training (Non-Direct Services)	$0.00	$0.00
340	Other Professional Services	$2,500.00	$0.00
341	Audit	$0.00	$0.00
350	Technical Services	$0.00	$0.00
440	Rentals	$0.00	$3,000.00
450	Construction Services	$0.00	$0.00
510	Student Transportation Services	$0.00	$0.00
530	Communications	$0.00	$2,148.12
560	Tuition	$0.00	$0.00
580	Travel	$0.00	$0.00
600	Supplies - Technology/Instructional	$79,627.07	$52,174.53
730	Equipment	$55,000.00	$1,250.00
734	Technology Related Hardware	$0.00	$0.00
735	Technology Software	$0.00	$0.00
800	Debt Service and Miscellaneous	$0.00	$0.00
917	Indirect Costs	$2,416.79	$5,592.63
	Total	$233,825.00	$233,265.00

Commendations and Opportunities

Commendations

1. The district has dedicated and resilient teachers who care deeply about helping all students.
2. There is a strong sense of pride in the community and district from staff and leadership.
3. The district in recent years has reduced the number of out-of-district placements for students attending Hartford Public Schools.
4. District leadership has acknowledged many of the district's key challenges and has taken initial steps to address them.
5. The district has created a continuum of services for students with more significant needs.
6. The district offers a diverse range of school types and configurations.

Opportunities

1. Address vacancies through an updated set of hiring strategies.
2. Increase retention and improve the attractiveness of the job for new hires by allowing special educators to play to their strengths.
3. Continue and accelerate efforts to implement a strong core curriculum and appropriate tier 1, 2, and 3 supports for students who struggle, including students with mild to moderate disabilities.
4. Seek external partners to expand and "brand" in-district programming for students with significant special needs.
5. Create a specialized team to more proactively manage identification, services, and placements for Hartford Public School students in Open Choice schools.
    a. **NOTE:** Such a team will be especially impactful with the CSDE's proposed legislation, reflected in Substitute Senate Bill (S.B. 1288), Section 2, which will assign the responsibility for the PPT and IEP to the sending district for Open Choice students.
6. Hire a small number of highly skilled project and program managers to lead implementation of some recommendations.

Summary of Opportunities

1. Address vacancies through an updated set of hiring strategies

Schools across the country are struggling with staffing shortages and unfilled positions, making it harder to support all students, particularly as student needs continue to increase. The district follows this national trend and has faced its own staffing shortages with significant and persistent vacancies, particularly amongst special education positions, including special education teachers and special education paraeducators. These unfilled roles are present across all levels from PK-12 and have been a chronic issue for the district for several years.

The challenge of filling vacancies is compounded by competitive pay disparities. Based on data provided by the district's finance office, Hartford Public Schools has an approximately $5,000 pay gap compared to median salaries in surrounding Hartford County districts, making recruitment and retention more difficult. Hartford's starting salary for staff with a bachelor's degree ranks 30th out of 33 and 29th out of 33 for staff with a master's degree. These figures were provided by the district's finance office from a study they had recently conducted.

The district is acutely aware of the strain these special education vacancies are putting on all schools, staff, and students and has followed many of the traditional steps to mitigate the issue, including:

Traditional Approaches:

- Job fairs
- Constant job postings
- College partnerships
- Outreach to existing staff to recruit colleagues

Services provided by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE)

- Encouraging dual enrollment
- Leveraging the CT special education employment system

Note: There are currently other retention and recruitment programs offered by CSDE the district is not leveraging or is using in a very limited scope, including:

- Enhanced Reciprocity Initiative
- NextGen Educators Program
- Emergency Certification for Teachers
- The Aspiring Educators Diversity (AED) Scholarship Program
- Educators Rising
- Teach Connecticut
- CHESLA Alliance District Teacher Load Subsidy Program

Updated Recruitment Strategies

The district's current strategies will need to be augmented with an updated set of hiring practices. These strategic recruitment practices include:

1a. Job Redesign: Opportunity 2 provides much more detail.

1b. Hiring Part Time Staff through the use of retired teachers, teachers who left to care for young children or aging parents, and/or college students.

1c. Offering Remote Work Options

1d. Hiring General Educators to Provide Academic Services to Students with IEPs

1e. Ensuring Paraeducator Requirements are Commensurate with Job Requirements and Compensation

1f. Leveraging Third Party Sources

In order to accelerate the adoption and implementation of these updated hiring strategies, the district should consider restructuring the Talent Office to reflect the current job market and align more closely with these new practices. This would involve shifting more resources towards nontraditional outreach and nontraditional candidates, as well as a greater focus from the Talent Office on retention efforts for current staff.

While these new hiring strategies should be embraced, it's important to also note that increasing the district's tier 1, 2, and 3 supports for students will help reduce the need to hire more special education teachers and should be pursued in parallel. Opportunity 3 goes into more detail on this strategy.

2. Increase retention and improve the attractiveness of the job for new hires by allowing special educators to play to their strengths

Students and staff are best served when special educators are allowed to play to their strengths and when school districts don't assume every special educator is strong in every aspect of an overly broad job description.

Because students with academic challenges have already been taught a concept in the past but haven't yet mastered it, the teacher will need multiple means of reteaching the concept. Intervention is most effective when math is taught by teachers with expertise in math, writing by teachers skilled in teaching writing, and reading by staff specifically trained in teaching reading.

Content strong teachers come in a variety of forms. The best indicator of a content strong teacher is an educator's training and their past student growth. Certification, role and title are not good indicators of who has content expertise or relevant subject specific training. Some special educators have extensive training in teaching reading, others not. The same is true for teaching math, managing behaviors, or

writing IEPs. Not every special educator is an expert in all subjects and areas, but they are expected to be.

Allowing teachers to play to their strengths is good for kids and will help significantly with teacher recruitment and retention. This practice has been very well received by special educators across the country. There are two key aspects of this strategy:

- Greater specialization
- Staff decide if and how to specialize (within reasonable limits)

Effective implementation of this strategy requires collaboration between both the Special Education department and the Talent Office. It's important that both offices understand and embrace the benefits of this strategy and that they align the work of their teams to support it. For example, job descriptions for new special education positions may need to change, which would require collaboration with the Talent Office.

3. Continue and accelerate efforts to implement a strong core curriculum and appropriate tier 1, 2, and 3 supports for students who struggle, including students with mild to moderate disabilities

In addition to high-quality core instruction, most students who struggle academically will also require extra instructional time during the school day to master prior content. This intervention is also known as tier 1, 2, and 3 supports. This extra time should be provided in addition to, not instead of, core instruction. Students who struggle academically have more to learn, and it will take them more time to learn. This extra time support should consist primarily of direct instruction that is connected to a high-quality curriculum, rather than time spent on independent work, computer programs, or homework help. This extra instructional time can be used to pre-teach or re-teach current year content, present material in multiple ways, and clarify misunderstandings for students who are struggling.

At the secondary level, many middle and high schools have found it easier to implement extra time intervention taught by content strong staff when this intervention is treated as a course. Students, both with and without an IEP, can be scheduled into these extra time interventions just like any other course.

Best practice calls for these intervention courses to be:

- Content specific, such as math skills, reading comprehension, or writing support rather than generalized "extra help."
- Focused on a narrow range of needs, such as one class for students with challenges in math fundamentals such as fractions and number sense and a different course for students struggling with equations.
- Taught by content strong teachers.
- Taught directly and explicitly targeted to specific skill gaps, rather than used for study skills or homework help.

- Sustained for 9 weeks to a year.
- Given a course code, credit bearing (at high school), and graded (at least pass/fail) so that students and staff take these intervention courses seriously.

Co-teaching, pulling students from core content courses for intervention support, and pushing into classrooms does not provide extra time for learning.

Insufficient Core Instruction and Limited Intervention Fuels IEP Referrals

Many staff seem to believe that if students can't master grade level core content, then special education and special educators are the appropriate response to help. While this is driven by a sense of wanting to help, it is not actually helpful.

Currently 21% of K-12 students in the district are identified as students with disabilities, compared to 17% statewide.

A number of years ago, in a commitment to inclusion, the district dramatically reduced the use of resource room support for students with IEPs.[4] While inclusion is a best practice, it was not a best practice to also scale back intervention. Extra time intervention need not reduce inclusion, and it does increase achievement.

In the last year or two, the district has begun to address this opportunity. Historically there has been a great deal of latitude around tier 1 curriculum and teaching practices in the district, which has not helped all kids achieve at high levels. In an effort to address this the district has been rolling out and supporting the use of a common rigorous core curriculum. District leadership has also recognized the shortcomings of the current support model and has begun rolling out a stronger SRBI/MTSS system with expanded tier 2 and 3 supports.

The district is still in the early stages of this effort and it has not been fully implemented district wide yet. Not all teachers have been trained in the new core curriculum and there is still a reliance on special education to meet the needs of students who struggle.

An Action Plan for Implementation

This effort represents large scale change for the district and will need to be implemented well and with fidelity. To increase the likelihood of successful implementation of these best practices, the district should partner with an outside organization that brings expertise in teaching and learning best practices, and more importantly in successful implementation of best practices. The partnership should include a review of the current state of these efforts in the district, as well as feedback from teachers and school-based staff and leadership on the strengths and needed support around this effort.

Implementation efforts should start first with grades K-5 and outside support should include a focus on:

- Accelerating and strengthening implementation of effective tier 1 instruction K-5 for all students, including students with mild to moderate special needs.
- Scaling best practice intervention (tier 2 and tier 3) K-5 for all students, including students with mild to moderate special needs.

[4] As shared by district and school leaders.

- Aligning staffing and scheduling to support effective tier 1 and effective intervention.
- Project management, monitoring of implementation, and objective feedback.

As part of the implementation support, a four-party steering committee should be formed that includes district leaders, CSDE, SERC, and existing partners or other outside organizations. The steering committee should meet monthly to track progress, share successes, and highlight challenges. Key metrics to track include

- Number of teachers utilizing the recommended curriculum and related materials.
- Number of students with disabilities accessing grade level core curriculum.
- New referrals by grade to special education.
- Progress on designing and implementing tier 2 and tier 3 interventions.
- Number of students with and without IEPs receiving best practice interventions.
- Student achievement growth internal benchmarks.

4. Seek external partners to expand and "brand" in-district programming for students with significant special needs

Districts are tasked with supporting students across a wide range of needs through various in- and out-of-district programs. Serving students with more significant needs, often through categorical or specialized classrooms, is an important part of the special education continuum of services.

Specialized programs for students with significant special needs serve their students best when they are set up with a clearly defined and narrow focus and staffed with teachers and paraeducators who have specialized skills based on the needs of the students in the classrooms. Having one room/program with students with similar needs is more impactful for students and reduces stress on teachers more than a program with the same number of students, but all having many different needs. Additionally, if the room/program has a clear focus, staff with expertise in this area can be assigned and can build greater expertise as well. In short, it is better for teachers and students as the range of students' needs served narrows. These narrowly focused, specialized programs are often referred to as categorical programs.

The district's categorical programming for students with more significant needs follows many of the best practices already. These programs intentionally group students based on specific need and prioritize student need over grade or home school. The district has also consolidated several programs to be housed within the same building, which allows behavioral support staff, social workers, and counselors to support more classrooms without the need for travel.

However, the reach of these programs is currently limited due to staffing shortages. Several of the categorical classrooms/grade levels were combined or reconfigured this year because of special education teacher vacancies, and nearly all classrooms are at full capacity with the number of students enrolled.

Expanding these programs will increase inclusion and reduce the costs of out-of-district placements. The average out-of-district placement cost for the district is $125,000 plus transportation, compared to an estimated in-district specialized program costing $35,000.

Two obstacles exist to expanding these programs. The first is staffing, and the second is that parents/guardians must agree to the programs through the PPT process.

Seek Highly Respected External Partners

The district could look to partner with nonprofit special education schools, organizations that serve students with specific disabilities, medical institutions, universities, or private companies to design, staff, and manage programs inside district schools. There is ample physical space in the schools.

For example, the district could partner with an out-of-district school serving students with behavioral challenges to staff and run programs similar to RISE to augment district capacity.

In creating these programs, the district might want to also partner with highly respected organizations to help design the programming in order to increase the appeal of the program to families. For example, a nonprofit focusing on the needs of students with autism might be willing to help design a program similar to iGOAL which would be staffed and run by a third party.

Third party providers have in recent years had an easier time hiring special education staff than districts as they have more flexibility over compensation, can promise a very focused job aligned to staff interests, and they have a national network of full-time recruiters – none of which a typical school district can match.

5. Create a specialized team to more proactively manage identification, services, and placements for Hartford Public School students in Open Choice schools

The state offers School Choice options in the Greater Hartford Region that allows students to attend public schools outside of their residential district. Students can choose to apply to this program and enter a lottery for placement at a variety of nearby schools, including magnet schools, technical high schools, and traditional public schools in other districts. This program is designed to provide students with more educational options and opportunities, particularly in underserved areas. For the 2023-2024 school year, just over 2,000 students were enrolled in outside districts through the Open Choice program. While these students do not attend Hartford Public Schools, the district is still responsible for covering their special education costs.

Currently, the district shared that they do not play a major role in the identification process or in determining IEP services for students who attend some Open Choice schools. While someone from the district convenes and attends PPT meetings for students at magnet schools and plays an active role in writing these IEPs, district administrators shared that it is uncommon for anyone from the district to attend PPT meetings for students attending Open Choice schools in neighboring districts. This stems primarily from a lack of staffing as special education staff already have their plates full managing the PPT process for the students in the district and do not have the bandwidth to also attend the Open Choice

school PPT meetings. Others also shared that there is a sense that district staff do not, and cannot, have much influence over the decisions made at these schools, making it less important to attend them.

The special education identification rates and associated costs for students attending Open Choice schools are not insignificant. Based on data shared by the district for the 2023-2024 school year, the district spent over $20 million on special education services for students in Open Choice schools, not including students placed out-of-district.

Students attending Open Choice schools are identified for special education services at nearly twice the rate as students who attend Hartford Public Schools, 21% versus 38%. However, further investigation is needed to understand the root cause of this as it could be the result of several factors, such as self-selection for choice programs by Hartford families with students with disabilities, over-referral of students from outside the district, or a combination of factors. Our analysis was not able to determine the root cause as this was beyond the scope of this review.

Section 2 of Substitute S.B. 1288, which was introduced in February, 2025, aims to address a lack of participation in decision-making related to students attending Open Choice districts by ensuring sending districts attend PPT meetings and play an active role in writing students' IEPs[5].

The Need for a Specialized Team

Given the large investment these students represent, and with pending legislation from Substitute S.B. 1288, the district should consider leveraging a team of part-time staff, through third party contractors or retired special educators, to focus on managing the PPT process for Open Choice school students.

This team would be responsible for attending all decision-making meetings for student with IEPs (or initial IEP referrals) for students in Open Choice schools. Substitute S.B. 1288 supports this type of engagement and could help to give the district more leverage in playing an active role in these meetings.

6. Hire a small number of highly skilled project and program managers to lead implementation of some recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this report can and should significantly improve student outcomes, reduce the pressure and stress on staff, and moderate costs. Unfortunately, they are not simple to implement and require a level of operational efficiencies and expertise that may not currently be available in the district.

While opportunity #3, a sustained focus on core instruction and expanded best practice tier 2 and 3 interventions falls squarely within the typical skill set of a teaching and learning department, the other four opportunities are a bit nontraditional. They will require identifying or helping develop third party partners for recruiting and staff, redesigning the jobs of hundreds of staff who will play to their strengths, developing partners to run programs for students with severe or significant special needs, establishing and managing a part time team to oversee IEPs in Open Choice districts, and conducting extensive financial analysis and contract negotiations.

[5] Substitute S.B. 1288, https://www.cga.ct.gov/2025/TOB/S/PDF/2025SB-01288-R00-SB.PDF

The successful implementation of the first four recommendations will require significant business acumen, human capital management, negotiation skills, and project management expertise. They also require a significant amount of dedicated time.

Due to the limited nature of the district's current operational and business expertise, the district should seek a small number of highly skilled project and program managers to oversee this work and to ensure clear, consistent cross-district communication with all stakeholders. These managers can come from restructuring current positions within the district, or through hiring additional staff or partnering with consultants in the areas where expertise is lacking in the district.

Key Positions and Roles

In order to effectively implement these recommendations, the district should consider finding (internally or externally):

- A leader for special education recruitment and retention with extensive non-K-12 experience including experience partnering with third party providers.
- An experienced special education leader with excellent communication skills and emotional intelligence (EQ) to help develop and pilot a play-to-strengths approach to special education job requirements.
- A leader with private sector experience designing, running and managing a large network of programs for students with severe disabilities; a large percentage of specialized programs are now owned by private sector companies that have a blend of business and special education leadership.
- A leader with strong management skills, detailed knowledge of the IEP process and much confidence to oversee IEPs and a part time team to manage Open Choice services and placements.

While this is a long list of new roles, it is not a costly list. It can be funded, in part, by perhaps repurposing some existing FTE in the budget for special education management. The department has a reasonably large rank of special education directors, who report to the head of special education.

More significantly, these positions pay for themselves. For example, if a single student need not go out of district, this would save nearly a $100,000 every year.

To increase the likelihood of successful implementation of these opportunities, the district should also consider partnering with an outside organization, or multiple organizations, that brings expertise in facilitating successful implementations of large-scale change across many schools at once in urban districts.

Next Steps

Given the scale of the changes outlined and the importance of effective implementation, the district should consider partnering with an outside organization, or multiple organizations, to support and help manage these efforts. Assistance should be from partners with specific experience in helping educators play to their strengths and creating in-district programming in partnership with outside vendors. It is

also recommended that the CSDE further assess the district's staffing vacancies and their impact on the implementation of IEPs and delivery of services to students.

Additional recommended next steps include:

- The district should share this report with their entire leadership team.
- The district should update their Strategic Plan to align with the recommendations in this report.
- The district should develop an action plan for short term and long-term goals with ongoing adjustments as needed based on progress monitoring.
- The district should assess the short-term and long-term goals to identify potential areas of requested support from external partners.