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# **Special Education & Struggling Students Opportunities Review**

**Wilton Public Schools**

**June 23, 2015**

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## Introduction

The District Management Council (DMC) has conducted a Special Education and Struggling Students Opportunities Review on behalf of Wilton Public Schools. The Special Education and Struggling Students Opportunities Review highlights many of the strengths in the district and focuses equally on the academic achievement of students and on the cost effective use of limited financial resources. The study is conducted under the framework of the continuous improvement model. It does not try to determine what is good or bad, but rather creates a road map to help move a district to the next level of performance. This process acknowledges that all systems can improve and that opportunities for improvement are built upon the district's current strengths, history, structure, and resources.

The review respects the reality that school districts are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. Although a large variety of thoughtful ideas for improvement are possible, a short, targeted plan is more beneficial than a long laundry list of observations, options, and possible actions. To that end, a small number of high-potential, high-impact interrelated opportunities are recommended.

The research for this project included extensive in-person interviews; an online survey for parents, principals, and staff; a deep look at hard data; classroom visits; benchmarking against best practices and like communities; and an analysis of weekly schedules shared by all support and special services staff for the week of April 26, 2015. Fully, 81% of requested staff schedules are included in this analysis.

In all cases, the evaluation recognizes that increasing student achievement, managing costs, continuing to comply with state and federal regulations, and respecting children, parents, and staff are all important.

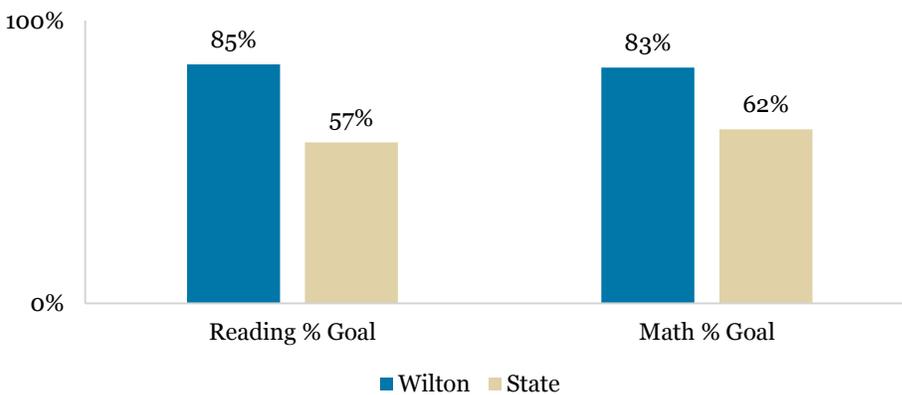
Not all opportunities listed in the document can be addressed at once. Additionally, any of these opportunities would typically take 1-3 years of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out, with a commitment from the leadership to provide focus and stability during the implementation process.

## District Background

Wilton Public Schools is a very high-performing district overall, with achievement levels typically exceeding the state average. However, special education students in Wilton Public Schools have historically underperformed their general education peers. With the recent transition to the new Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), student achievement in Wilton Public Schools will come under renewed examination given the introduction of more rigorous curriculum and student expectations. Wilton Public Schools first utilized the SBAC in the 2013-2014 school year and Connecticut has fully rolled out the assessment for the 2014-2015 school year, but achievement data is not yet available. All achievement data referred to below are from the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), the precursor assessment to SBAC for reading and math standards in grades 3 and 8.

### Achievement Comparison, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CMT, 2013

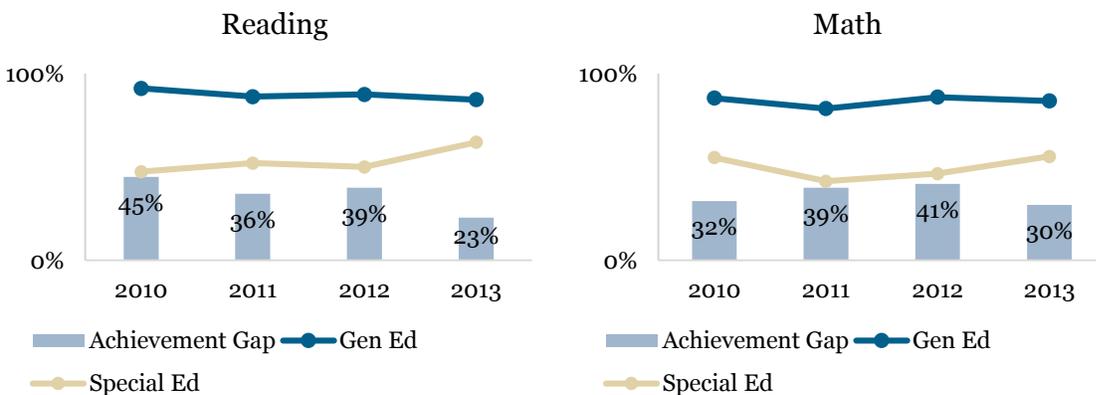
*All Students*



- Wilton Public Schools outperforms the state in reading and math in grade 3 by over 20 percentage points.

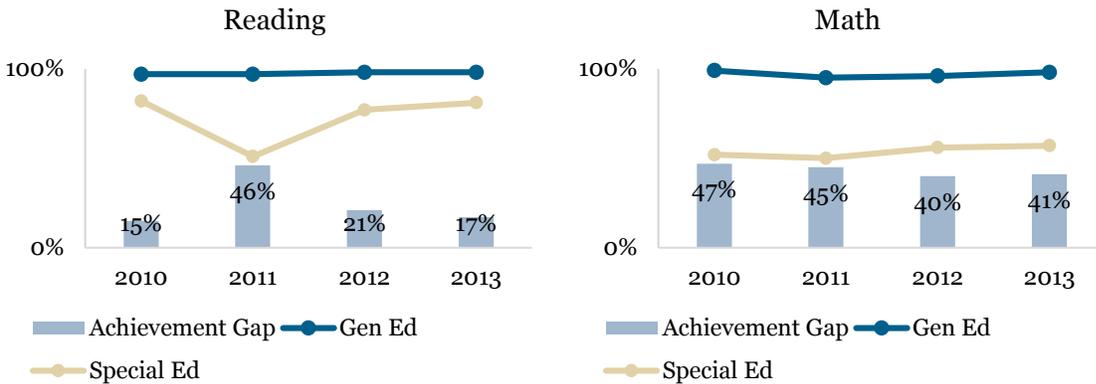
### Achievement Gap, 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CMT

*General Education vs. Special Education*



- The achievement gaps between general education and special education in third grade reading and math persist but have narrowed since 2010.

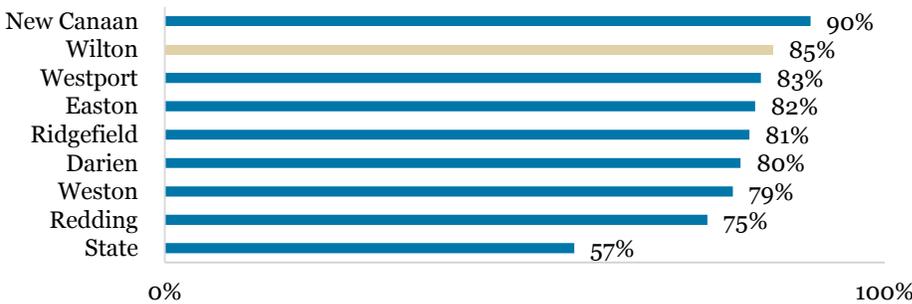
**Achievement Gap, 8<sup>th</sup> Grade CMT**  
*General Education vs. Special Education*



- The achievement gaps between general education and special education in eighth grade reading and math have remained relatively constant since 2010 and is much larger in math than in reading.

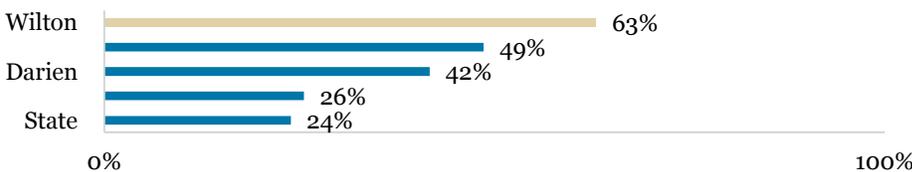
When compared to similar districts in the state, overall the district performs at very high levels, and special education students outperform special education students in other like districts.

**Above Goal on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading CMT, All Students, 2013**  
*District Reference Group A vs. Wilton Public Schools*



- Wilton Public Schools' 3<sup>rd</sup> graders performed better in reading than many similar districts in 2013.

**Above Goal on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading CMT, Special Education, 2013\*<sup>1</sup>**  
*District Reference Group A vs. Wilton Public Schools*



- The district had higher reading performance for special education students than similar districts in 2013.

<sup>1</sup> Data not available for all DRG A districts

## Commendations

The district has much to be proud of and many strengths that create a strong foundation for continuous improvement.

### **1. The district is committed to providing an inclusive education for students with disabilities.**

At all levels, special education teachers, general education teachers, and parents indicated that including students with special needs in the general education classroom is important and valued.

This commitment to meeting the needs of students with mild to moderate—as well as some students with severe disabilities—in the general education setting has had the positive effect of providing most students with opportunities to be educated alongside their peers.

- 97% of PPT staff indicated that inclusion is beneficial for most students with mild-moderate disabilities.
- 85% of parents of students with IEPs indicated that their students were welcomed into the school community.

### **2. District staff deeply care about all students.**

Throughout focus groups it was apparent that staff members in the Wilton Public Schools deeply care about students with disabilities. Being an educator of students with disabilities is a demanding job, especially during times of tight budgets and rising expectations. Most staff members are committed to working in Wilton Public Schools and improving outcomes for all students. They have confidence in their colleagues and take great pride in their students. Above all else, educators across the district expressed a genuine desire to do what is best for their students.

### **3. District leadership is committed to raising student achievement through the implementation of new SRBI practices and a review of current supports for struggling students.**

A central focus of district leadership's initiatives this year was the development of an improved process and guidelines for Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) that manifest itself in the creation of a SRBI handbook shared districtwide in October. At the same time, the district has introduced Instructional Effectiveness Teams (IETs) to allow for increased teacher collaboration geared toward the improvement of instructional practices. Combined with the comprehensive review of special education and struggling student support practices underway, the district is practicing continuous improvement.

#### **4. The district is committed to the social and emotional needs of students.**

Staff are committed to supporting not only the academic needs of students, but also the social and emotional needs of students. These commitments became very clear through the expression of concerns about the heightened expectations placed upon students in Wilton as students strive for academic excellence and also requests from staff for increased training in mental health strategies.

Programmatically, Wilton Public Schools' commitment to its students' social emotional needs is evident through the presence of the Support Center at Middlebrook and the FLEX program at Wilton High School both designed to provide students with increased counseling support and to positively enable students to succeed in their academic classes. In addition, Wilton Public Schools employs a strong team of psychologists, social workers, and counselors to provide counseling supports directly to students in need.

#### **5. The district has taken an inclusive approach to reviewing the supports for struggling students.**

Throughout Wilton Public Schools' effort to review supports for struggling students, a strong team of "Champions for Change" including administrators, staff, and parents has been involved to share their insights. This commitment to an inclusive approach is a sign that the district is focused on producing lasting change in implementing the opportunities to follow within this report.

## **Opportunities**

This report seeks to identify opportunities to improve supports for struggling students in Wilton Public Schools. After careful research and analysis, the following opportunities have been identified, which outline high-impact actions the district can take to raise student achievement and cost-effectively use limited resources.

- 1. Consider adopting a consistent, best-practice approach to teaching reading to struggling students without IEPs and with mild-moderate disabilities in grades K-5.**
- 2. Ensure the fidelity of the implementation of the SRBI practices already developed by the district.**
- 3. Consider strengthening and expanding supports for students who struggle to read and comprehend at the secondary level.**
- 4. Consider more tightly integrating social, emotional, and behavioral services into the programs at each school.**
- 5. Consider increasing the amount of time related services staff spend with students, while also closely managing group size through thoughtful scheduling.**
- 6. Consider streamlining the paperwork and meetings for special services staff.**

## **1. Consider adopting a consistent, best-practice approach to teaching reading to struggling students without IEPs and with mild-moderate disabilities in grades K-5.**

Elementary reading is an integral part of building a foundation for learning and therefore a crucial area of focus when addressing the needs of struggling students. Reading is the gateway to all other learning and the implications for students who do not master reading at the elementary level reverberate throughout other subjects. Writing, social studies, and science cannot be mastered without strong reading skills. Even modern math is full of word problems; reading and math success are highly correlated. Ensuring that all students read on grade level is critical to their future success in school and beyond graduation.

While students in the district read at a higher level than like communities, the coming higher standards raise the bar significantly for reading comprehension.

Based on the work of the National Reading Panel (NRP), the What Works Clearinghouse, and the experience of best-practice districts, a proven plan for teaching reading includes:

### **Standards**

1. Clear and rigorous grade-level expectations for reading proficiency (e.g., specific DRA scores expected of all students at the beginning, middle and end of each grade level).
2. Early identification of struggling readers, starting in kindergarten.
3. Frequent measurement of student achievement and growth, influencing instruction and intervention (at minimum three times per year, preferably more).

### **Core Instruction**

4. Balanced instruction in the five areas of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) as part of a 90-minute/day reading block.
5. Explicit instruction in phonics in the early grades and comprehension in the later grades.

### **Intervention**

6. Immediate and intensive additional instruction for struggling readers, averaging 30 minutes a day and using more than one strategy.
7. Remediation and intervention that are seamlessly connected to each day's full class instruction.

### **Effective Teaching**

8. A skilled teacher trained in reading instruction.

### **DMC has identified two additional management best practices**

9. A district leader in charge of reading district-wide.
10. Instructional coaching and intensive professional development to improve classroom instruction.

## 1a. A skilled teacher trained in reading instruction

For students who struggle, research indicates that the subject specific training of the instructor has significant bearing on the student’s likelihood of achieving grade level mastery. Typically, a teacher who has engaged in extensive training in the teaching of reading is more likely to have intricate working knowledge of reading, and an ability to understand the challenges and the skills to explain the strategies to a struggling student in a way that will lead to mastery. Districts that have made the most significant gains among struggling readers have done so by providing struggling students both without IEPs and with mild-moderate disabilities extra instructional time from teachers skilled in reading instruction.

Currently in Wilton Public Schools, students who are below benchmark do not always receive reading intervention from highly skilled teachers of reading and the background of staff providing elementary reading instruction varies between schools. Staff explained that between the two schools, and even between different Houses within each school, different parameters were set for determining reading interventions as well as who would provide the support. Schedule analysis evidenced these key distinctions between Miller-Driscoll and Cider Mill as to how paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and reading teachers and consultants provide reading instruction to struggling students.

At Miller-Driscoll, general education paraprofessionals are spending 68% of their time with students providing reading instruction. Staff indicated that often general education paraprofessionals do not have backgrounds in reading instruction, yet are frequently providing small group or 1:1 instruction to struggling learners during the core literacy block. In comparison, at Cider Mill, general education paraprofessionals are only providing reading instruction for 9% of their time with students, shifting their academic focus to math in the later grades. This distinction in practice is highlighted by Miller-Driscoll’s explicit usage of “Reading Paraprofessionals” to support reading instruction in classrooms across the school.

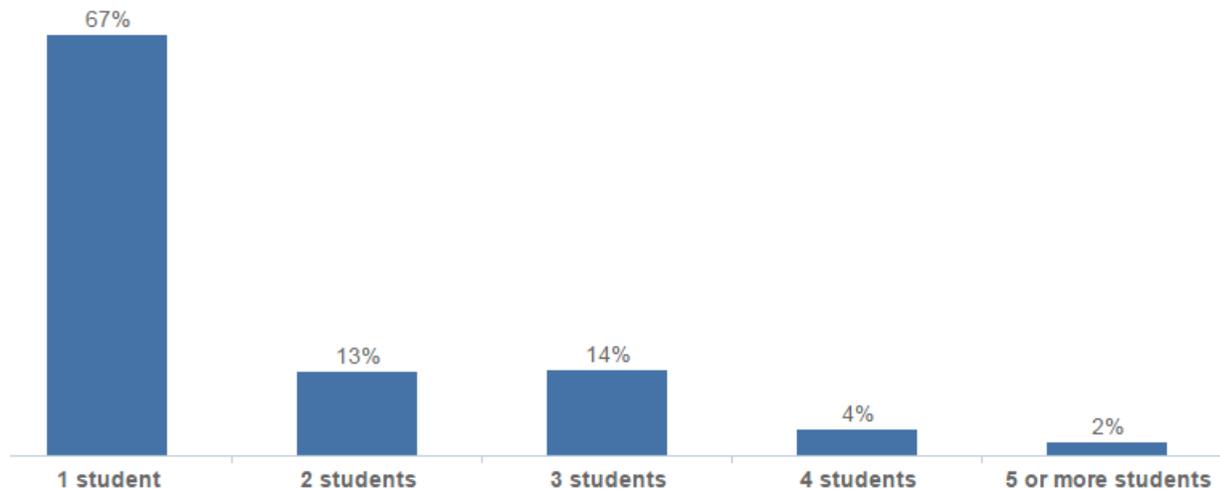
### General Education Paraprofessional Instructional Topic

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Miller-Driscoll</b>	<b>Cider Mill</b>
Reading	68%	9%
Writing	16%	21%
Math	1%	32%
Social Studies	0%	4%
Science	0%	1%
<b>Total Academic Instruction</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>67%</b>

- In both cases, general education paraprofessionals are providing more academic instruction than is best practice.

When general education paraprofessionals work with students it is in very small groups. This suggests a theory of action that prioritizes intense adult support rather than highly skilled support.

**General Education Paraprofessional Student Group Size**



- General education paraprofessionals support students 1:1 67% of the time.

Wilton Public Schools employs many highly skilled special education teachers who may have received extensive training in the teaching of reading and other academic subjects, it is important to proactively ensure that the special education teachers most effective in each subject area are the ones providing instruction to struggling students. Staff indicated that often special education teachers are assigned caseloads that have very little correlation with their training or background. Thoughtfully pairing teachers who have the background and training in the instruction of reading with students struggling in reading can be a useful approach to supporting students. Additionally, special education teachers with a stronger background in math would be supporting students with IEP goals in that content area.

**Special Education Teacher Instructional Topic**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Miller-Driscoll</b>	<b>Cider Mill</b>
Reading	47%	66%
Math	18%	24%
Writing	19%	6%
<b>Total Academic Instruction</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>96%</b>

- Special education teachers are spending nearly all of their time with students providing academic instruction. At Miller-Driscoll, 47% of this time is spent on reading instruction, while at Cider Mill, 66% of this time is spent on reading instruction.

## **Helping improve core instruction**

Highly skilled reading staff can be integral to supporting and effectively remediating struggling learners. Not only can they directly support the students to achieve grade level mastery, reading staff can also provide valuable coaching to general education teachers in effective instruction of key reading principles to better deliver effective Tier 1 instruction.

Staff indicated that often, general education teachers do not feel confident supporting students with special needs, unsure of how to modify lessons or concepts to make materials accessible for them. This perception may lead to silo-ing of special education students, where the special educators (teachers and paraprofessionals alike) become primarily responsible for the social, emotional, and academic success of these students. One administrator commented, “I wish all staff realized they are responsible for each and every student. Teachers think special education is the answer to a student that is struggling.” Staff also indicated that while some classroom teachers feel ownership over the learning of all students, some still view students with IEPs as the special education teacher’s responsibility. Further, discussions indicated that very little emphasis is placed on coaching teachers in supporting struggling learners both with and without IEPs, but among teams there was a consensus for this type of support.

### **1b. Immediate and intensive additional instruction for struggling readers**

Students who struggle to read on grade level need more time for reading instruction in order to catch up and keep up with their peers. Research has shown that this is true for both students with mild to moderate disabilities and students without IEPs who struggle to read on grade level. In a best practice district, struggling students are provided with an additional 30 minutes of instruction every day. This reading intervention support is over and above the core literacy block.

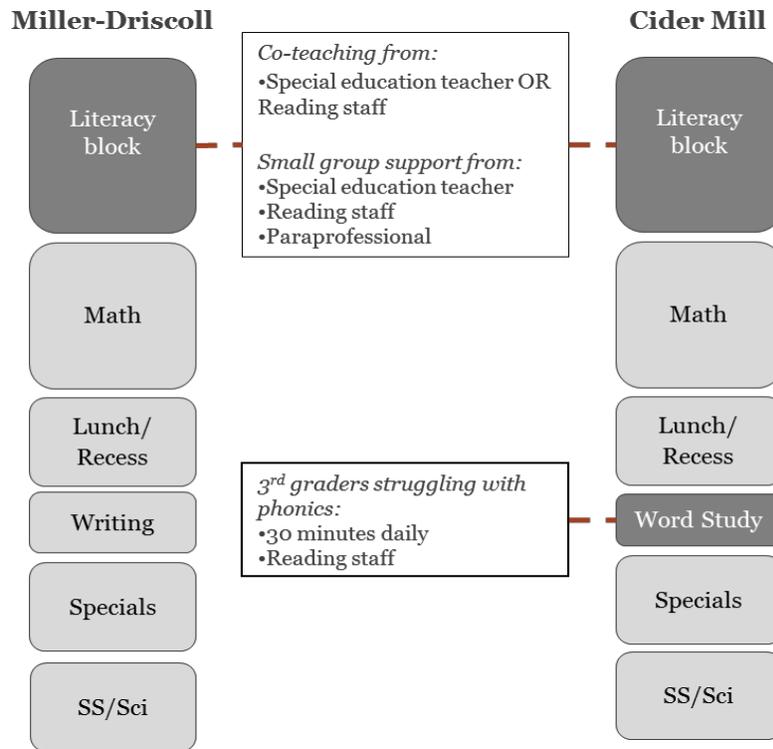
In Wilton Public Schools, a strong example of 30 minutes of daily intervention became apparent during discussions with staff. Reading staff at Cider Mill indicated that they are providing phonics remediation in small group pull-outs every day for 30 minutes to any student with an identified need until the student is fully remediated.

However, beyond this example, the approach to teaching elementary reading to struggling readers varies between the two elementary schools and there is not a consistent practice of providing additional time on task. Both elementary schools are providing greater intensity of support, rather than extra time on task. In this model, students are assigned multiple adults to support them at the same time, but not given extra time to learn.

As an example, it was indicated that at Miller-Driscoll, a reading teacher or special education teacher often pushes in to the classroom literacy block to support students while at Cider Mill, co-teaching supports from either a special education teacher or reading teacher take place during the literacy block. In addition, in both schools, students are sometimes pulled out of class for additional instruction during the literacy block. While well-intended practices, both push-in and co-teaching supports do not provide the extra instructional time for students that is desired and best practice pull-out should occur in addition to core literacy instruction in order to provide extra instructional time.

## Current Elementary Reading Instruction Support Models

*Illustrative*



- Staff at the two elementary schools are providing support through increased intensity models that typically do not provide extra instructional time with the exception of some extra phonics support.

### **1c. Financial Investment**

Wilton Public Schools has made a significant investment in supporting students with and without disabilities who struggle academically. Based on current staffing practices Wilton Public Schools is investing approximately 4.2 million dollars.

#### Current Investment in Supports for Struggling Students

*K-5 Level Only*

<b>Role</b>	<b>FTE</b>	<b>Average salaries &amp; benefits</b>	<b>Total investment</b>
General Education Paraprofessionals	14.5	\$53,000	\$768,500
Special Education Teachers	15.0	\$122,000	\$1,830,000
Reading Teachers	3.2	\$122,000	\$390,400
Reading Consultants	10.5	\$122,000	\$1,281,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>93.2</b>		<b>\$4,269,900</b>

This represents a more than sufficient pool of funds which could be shifted or redirected to provide content strong staff for remediation and intervention through extra instructional time, as well as supporting students' other needs.

Notably, with the current staffing of reading teachers and consultants, Wilton Public Schools should be able to address the reading needs of all students with and without IEPs and still have staff with the capacity to be full-time consultants to teachers.

**Estimated Investment Required for Best Practice Reading Instruction**

*K-5 Level Only - Illustrative*

Total elementary enrollment	1,877
% 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade students who did not pass the 2013 Reading CMT	15%
Estimated # of students who struggle in reading K-5	280
# of students per reading teacher	35
# of reading teachers required	8.0
<b>Total cost of providing additional time for students struggling with reading from skilled reading teachers</b>	<b>\$976,000</b>

- The district’s current staffing of reading teachers and consultants should be able to cover all reading needs K-5.
- Eight FTE are needed for student support and nearly 14 FTE reading teachers and consultants are already funded.

Additionally, research indicates that paraprofessionals are not effective in raising the academic achievement of students. Nationwide, many districts have moved away from the use of general education paraprofessionals and reduced the use of special education paraprofessionals. For districts that do have general education paraprofessionals, their main role is Kindergarten classroom support. Although no nationwide benchmarking exists, the most common pattern is districts nationwide often have one general education paraprofessional per Kindergarten classroom or a half time paraprofessional per classroom, while others choose to only have the Kindergarten teacher present. If Wilton Public Schools were to place an average of 0.5 FTE general education paraprofessionals in Kindergarten classrooms, Wilton Public Schools would need approximately 7.5 FTE general education paraprofessionals<sup>2</sup>. This is a potential savings of 7.0 FTE or \$371,000.

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<sup>2</sup> Assumes 15 Kindergarten classrooms with an average class size of 18 students

## **2. Ensure the fidelity of the implementation of the SRBI practices already developed by the district.**

In October of 2014, the district introduced a Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) Handbook to ensure that all students receive instruction that meets individual academic and social emotional needs. The handbook is designed to articulate a clear process by which a student can be identified as needing intervention and remediation support and the type of support to be provided at each increasingly intensive tier of intervention with procedures for progress monitoring the student response. A strong set of general education SRBI practices and procedures will not only inform general education interventions, but will also inform special education interventions, particularly in the core academic subject areas of reading, English, and math.

Despite the introduction of the new SRBI handbook, it does not appear that practices are being implemented consistently. Staff shared that in many classrooms in the district, many students were unlikely to receive differentiated instruction or intervention unless that child was referred to special education.

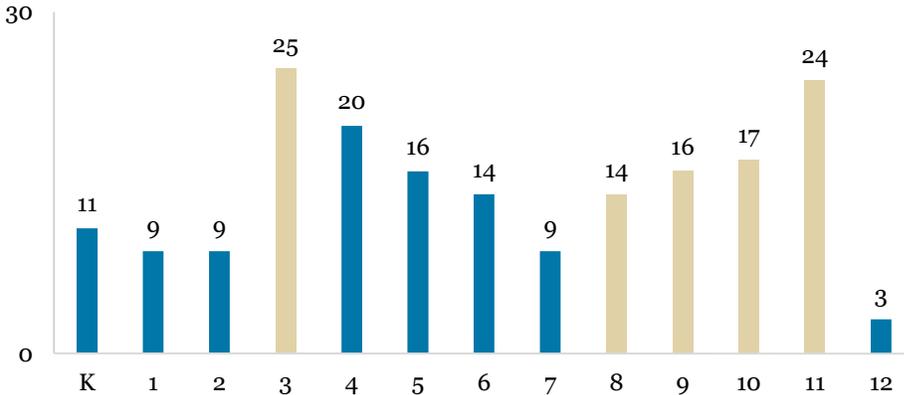
In addition, both administrators and staff members expressed some concern about their understanding of the SRBI and special education practices. 75% of participating administrators and 47% of participating PPT staff somewhat disagree or strongly disagree that, “The criteria for IEP eligibility are clear and well understood by all involved.”

When asked what the district could do to improve supports for students with and without disabilities, one staff member stated the district could, “More clearly define the SRBI process and level of intervention at each tier. Provide more thoughtful and relevant professional development. Provide clear guidelines for eligibility for services and support staff decisions in and out of PPT meetings.”

Two symptoms of administrator and staff uncertainty regarding the SRBI and special education practices are the atypical amounts of IEP referrals and Section 504 plans across the district.

Increases in IEP referrals at the transitions after 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade with decreasing percentages of students found eligible for services indicates a misunderstanding of the intervention practices among schools combined with concerns over the increased rigor in higher grades. In a best-practice system, IEP referrals diminish significantly by middle school, but in Wilton, IEP referrals increase greatly in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and once again 8<sup>th</sup> grade onward.

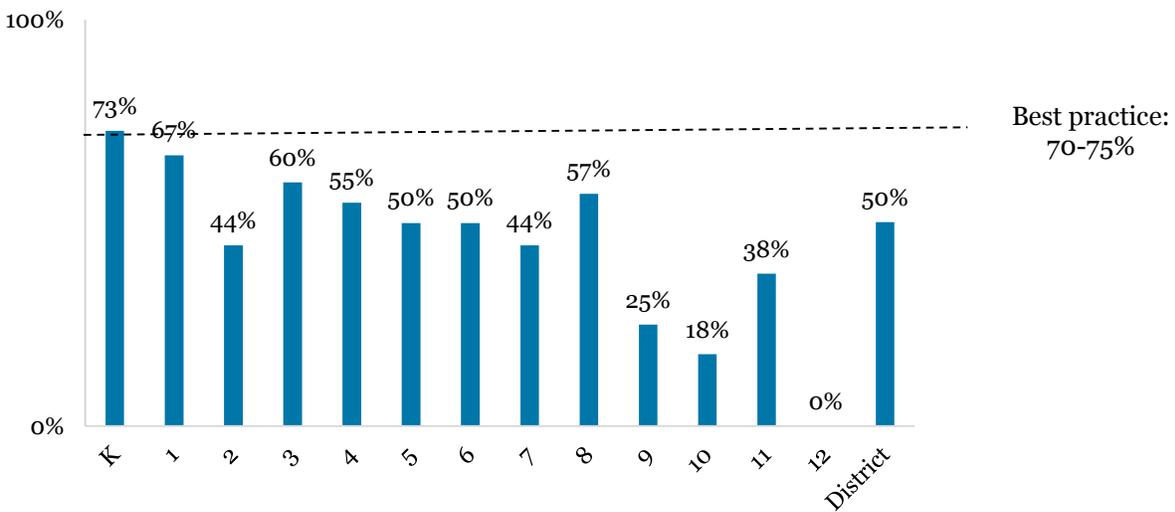
**IEP Referrals by Grade**



- IEP referrals greatly increase in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and continually increase in grades 8-11.

Another key aspect of determining the strength of an SRBI system is the rate by which an initial IEP referral results in special education services. Currently half of all students referred to special education do not have special needs.

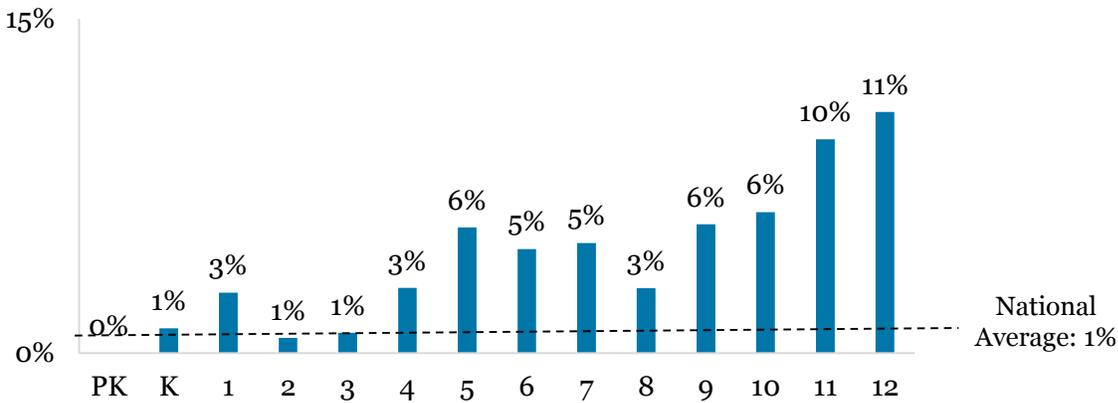
**Percentage of Initial IEP Referrals Found Eligible for Services by Grade**



As with IEP referrals, the increase in Section 504 plans as grades progress and the sheer number of Section 504 plans may be an indication that both staff and parents may not have a clear understanding of the available interventions nor a sense that the district is providing students needed extra interventions without a Section 504 plan.

The national average for Section 504 plans is roughly 1% of enrollment. Currently, Wilton Public Schools has 5x the national average of students with Section 504 plans. Notably, in grades 10 and 11, Wilton Public Schools has 10x and 11x the national average, respectively.

**Percentage of Students with Section 504 Plans by Grade**



- The national average for Section 504 plans is 1% of enrollment. Overall, Wilton Public Schools has a 5% rate of Section 504 plans which peaks in 12<sup>th</sup> grade at 11%.

A concerted effort to provide administrators and staff with training, systems, structures and tools on the strategies detailed in the SRBI handbook and IEP eligibility criteria will go a long way to ensure staff are comfortable in providing the needed interventions and should also decrease the rate of IEP referrals and Section 504 plans currently present in the district.

### **3. Consider strengthening and expanding supports for students who struggle to read and comprehend at the secondary level.**

Helping struggling students at the secondary level reach and exceed grade-level expectations is a unique challenge. By the time these students reach middle or high school, they often have significant gaps in key foundational skills, and may hold conceptual misunderstandings as well as struggle to master complex content.

Typically, students who struggle to read at the secondary level fall within two groups. The first group is composed of students who are below grade level and have a primary need in reading comprehension. A second, smaller group is composed of students with longstanding reading accuracy and fluency difficulties. Both of these groups require intensive reading intervention at their instructional level provided by a skilled teacher of reading in order to close the gap and meet grade level standards, and become college and career ready.

While many districts nationwide struggle to provide additional reading instruction to struggling students at the secondary level, Wilton Public Schools is already well-positioned to provide intensive reading instruction for all struggling students with or without IEPs. Currently Middlebrook offers a double Language Arts block of English and Reading/Writing Workshop for all general education students and an English and Reading/Writing Lab for students identified as needing more intensive instruction in reading and writing (typically students with special needs). Wilton High School offers credit-bearing courses in Comprehensive Reading to general education 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, Advanced Reading to general education 10-12<sup>th</sup> grade students, and Corrective Reading to students with special needs in grades 9 -12<sup>th</sup>. Wilton Public Schools can build off this strong foundation and ensure that all students who struggle to read receive the necessary supports.

#### **A skilled teacher trained in reading instruction**

Just as the training and background of the instructor is vital for the reading success of students at the elementary schools, this is just as true in secondary reading instruction. Effectively teaching reading to struggling students with or without IEPs at the secondary level requires a specific skillset. Research shows the training of the instructor has significant bearing on the student's likelihood of mastering reading skills. For example, many, if not most, secondary English teachers do not have specific skills and training in teaching secondary reading and many special education teachers also lack this specialized training.

In order to provide struggling students with the instruction necessary to meet grade level standards, Wilton Public Schools should ensure that all teachers providing secondary reading instruction have a background in reading instruction and are provided with continual job-embedded training as to improve their skills and best serve students.

#### **A strong and unambiguous screening process**

Providing effective reading instruction for all struggling students requires that a district has information around staffing as well as the identification of student needs. To this end, districts that have strong secondary reading interventions in place have created a screening process for all students to determine placement that is automatic, diagnostic, and well-understood by staff, students, and the community.

Currently Reading/Writing Lab at Middlebrook and the various reading courses offered at Wilton High School are described as being offered to students who need assistance in meeting Common Core State Standards based on teacher and counselor recommendations.

Given the importance of determining whether a student should be provided with additional reading instruction, the district can ensure the identification process is robust by including three types of assessments in addition to informal teacher and counselor observations:

1. *Formal outcome assessments:* These tests typically assess students' ability to understand and think about the meaning of text as defined by the state literacy standards.
2. *Formal screening measures:* Part of this information can be gained from the prior year outcomes test, but may also be gained by using a published intervention program or by having an experienced teacher have a student read a grade-level passage orally and summarize the reading.
3. *Formal progress monitoring assessments:* Many districts use published intervention programs or develop their own benchmark assessments, which are given several times a year. Teachers can also conduct this progress monitoring if they are trained to construct assignments or tests that measure their students' abilities to meet grade level standards throughout the year.

A robust and consistent use of data to determine who receives interventions will ensure that all students who need additional reading instruction are provided targeted intervention in a predictable and timely manner and that staffing is aligned with identified student needs.

### **Daily additional instruction of approximately one hour**

In addition to the reading instruction that occurs across content areas during the school day, struggling readers at the secondary level need approximately one additional hour of daily reading instruction in order to catch up to their grade level peers.

Currently Middlebrook offers 40-45 minutes of "extra" instruction to non-struggling and struggling readers through the double Language Arts block. Since many of these students are not struggling readers, the instruction covers a wide range of needs and may not be targeted enough to students with more significant struggles. The teaching of English Language Arts, discussing what students have read, and teaching reading are three different topics.

As struggling readers require more time than their peers to meet grade level standards, Middlebrook could consider providing struggling readers with extra instruction targeted to their specific reading deficits.

Currently Wilton High School offers reading instruction in blocks of 45 minutes. As with Middlebrook, Wilton High School could consider extending the length of reading instruction time provided to struggling readers to enable them to close the gap and meet grade level standards.

## 4. Consider more tightly integrating social, emotional, and behavioral services into the programs at each school.

A student’s development of social and emotional skills enable him or her to learn to communicate, connect with others, resolve conflict, and cope with challenges. In turn, the development of these social and emotional skills allow a student to positively pursue academic success. In school, students develop these skills through natural interactions with peers and teachers, but also through prescribed interactions with a team of mental health experts who play a unique role in supporting students and teachers. Maximizing the ability of these staff to work directly with students is a key component to strong social, emotional, and behavioral supports.

### 4a. Provide more time for counseling

#### Psychologists

Psychologists play an integral role in the identification and evaluation of special education students. The IEP process is an important responsibility for psychologists. Across the country, however, the time psychologists dedicate to the process varies significantly between districts.

#### Psychologist Activities

Activity	% Time Spent
Counseling / crisis intervention	27%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>27%</b>

IEP testing / assessment	15%
Attend meeting (PPT)	13%
IEP writing / Paperwork	10%
<b>Total Due Process</b>	<b>38%</b>

Collaboration with colleagues	8%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	8%
Planning / materials preparation	5%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	3%
Parent communication	3%
Professional development	3%
Personal lunch	2%
Student observation	2%
504 writing / Paperwork	1%
Coaching / staff development	1%
Medicaid billing / service documentation	1%
Agency coordination of supports and services	1%
Travel	0%
504 testing / assessment	0%
Under/over reported	-3%
<b>Total Other Indirect Service</b>	<b>35%</b>

- On average, a psychologist spends 27% of their time counseling students.

Wilton Public Schools has 4x the national average of psychologists, adjusted for enrollment, but because evaluations may take longer than the national average, this results in less time serving students.

**Psychologist Staffing in Comparison to National Average<sup>1</sup>**

	<b>Wilton Public Schools</b>	<b>National Avg.</b>
Total Psychologist Staffing (FTE)	10.5	2.6
Estimated Person Days Per Evaluation	5.8	1.5

Closely managing the evaluation process, and the additional indirect responsibilities requested of psychologists can free up time for direct counseling services to students. National research indicates that on average, the evaluation/IEP process takes 1.5 days. If the current evaluation process were examined and streamlined to align with national averages, it could repurpose the equivalent of 5.6 FTE of psychologists for counseling students.

**Providing More Psychologist Time for Counseling**

*Illustrative*

	<b>Current</b>	<b>Possible</b>
FTE	10.5	10.5
Total Evaluations Per Year	233	233
Estimated Person Days Per Evaluation	5.8	1.5
Days of Counseling Per FTE	50	147
<b>Increase in Counseling Services Multiple</b>	-	<b>2.9</b>
<b>Additional Counseling Services Possible (FTE)</b>	-	<b>5.6</b>

**Social Workers**

Social workers are an additional resource for supporting the social and emotional health of students. It is not uncommon for the indirect responsibilities of social workers to be scheduled first, with student counseling inadvertently becoming second priority with the time that remains.

Schedule analysis indicates that social workers also support the IEP evaluation process within schools, and dedicate approximately 12 hours per week to this activity. While each district varies, understanding and refining the overlap of responsibilities between social workers and psychologists can not only reduce duplicate work efforts, but also free up time to dedicate to social emotional support.

## **Social Worker Activities**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Time Spent</b>
Counseling / crisis intervention	37%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>37%</b>

IEP writing / Paperwork	11%
Attend meeting (PPT)	10%
IEP testing / assessment	8%
<b>Total Due Process</b>	<b>29%</b>

Collaboration with colleagues	7%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	6%
Agency coordination of supports and services	5%
Parent communication	5%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	5%
Personal lunch	4%
Planning / materials preparation	2%
Student observation	1%
Under/over reported	0%
<b>Total Other Indirect Service</b>	<b>34%</b>

- On average, a social worker spends 37% of their time directly supporting students.
- Social workers dedicate 29% of their week to the IEP process.

By streamlining the current responsibilities and processes so that the primary responsibility of social workers is supporting students 75% of their contracted time each week, Wilton Public Schools could gain the equivalent of an additional 1.6 FTE dedicated to counseling.

## **Additional Counseling Days Gained by Increasing Direct Service**

Current Social Worker FTE	4.3
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Current % Direct Service	37%
Target % Direct Service	75%
<b>Additional Counseling Services Possible</b>	<b>1.6 FTE</b>

## **Counselors**

Counselors provide a variety of supports to schools and students in the management of student records, coordinating Section 504 plans, managing academic issues, scheduling schools and students, collaborating with colleagues, and providing direct support to students.

## **Counselor Activities**

### *K-8 Level Only*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Time Spent</b>
Counseling / crisis intervention	33%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>33%</b>

Collaboration with colleagues	10%
Parent communication	10%
Attend meeting (PPT)	6%
504 writing / Paperwork	6%
Planning / materials preparation	6%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	6%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	6%
Personal lunch	5%
Student observation	2%
504 testing / assessment	1%
Scheduling	1%
Under/over reported	10%
<b>Total Indirect Service</b>	<b>67%</b>

- At the K-8 level, counselors are spending 33% of their week providing counseling to students.

## **Counselor Activities**

### *High School Level Only*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Time Spent</b>
Counseling / crisis intervention	26%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>26%</b>

Planning / materials preparation	16%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	15%
Parent communication	11%
Collaboration with colleagues	9%
Professional development	7%
Attend meeting (PPT)	4%
Personal lunch	3%
504 writing / Paperwork	3%
Scheduling	1%
Travel	0%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	0%
Under/over reported	5%
<b>Total Indirect Service</b>	<b>74%</b>

- On average, a counselor is spending 26% of their time during the week directly supporting students at the high school level.

Some districts target for a counselor to spend 75% of their time with students at the K-8 level and 50% of their time with students at the high school level. By streamlining and reprioritizing the current responsibilities and processes of counselors, Wilton Public Schools could gain an equivalent additional 4.2 FTE dedicated to counseling.

**Additional Counseling Days Gained by Increasing Direct Service**

Current K-8 Counselor FTE	6.0
Current % Direct Service	33%
Target % Direct Service	75%
<b>Additional Counseling Services Possible</b>	<b>2.5 FTE</b>

Current High School Counselor FTE	7.0
Current % Direct Service	26%
Target % Direct Service	50%
<b>Additional Counseling Services Possible</b>	<b>1.7 FTE</b>

#### **4b. Incorporate ABA and BCBA services more tightly into the schools**

In a best practice district, staff members who provide emotional and behavioral services to students are tightly looped into the broader team of general education and special services staff. In this scenario, a qualified and trained behavior analyst designs and directly oversees the intervention and the development of treatment goals that stem from a detailed assessment of each student's needs. In addition, the behavior analyst meets regularly with family members and program staff to plan ahead, review progress, and make adjustments as needed.

Currently Wilton Public Schools is spending \$1,176,162 and \$141,150 on contracted ABA and BCBA services, respectively. Staff shared that these contracted individuals develop functional behavior assessments (FBAs) and behavior plans and train special education paraprofessionals to carry out the plans.

While a reasonable plan on paper, staff revealed that they lack a clear understanding of the district's approach to supporting students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. Staff indicated that although the contracted behaviorists are involved in the PPT process of a student on a behavior plan, they rarely have the opportunity to interact with them to ensure that the plan is being implemented with fidelity or to learn the strategies for improving their students' behavior.

In addition, 71% of participating administrators somewhat disagree or strongly disagree that the district provides appropriate supports for students with emotional disabilities; 57% of participating administrators somewhat disagree or strongly disagree that the district provides appropriate supports for students with behavioral disabilities.

In particular, one administrator commented that, "Our mental health staff should be more proactive by delivering lessons in the classroom, strategies for both general education and special education students, and how to write an effective behavior plan. I also think a BCBA on staff would help support both students and staff."

A few potential options exist that might improve the district's approach to providing emotional and behavioral supports:

1. If the district plans to continue the model of utilizing paraprofessionals to carry out behavior plans, it may be beneficial to ensure that ABA and BCBA staff meet daily with these paraprofessionals to guarantee understanding and the fidelity of the plan's implementation and adjust the plan and strategies regularly.
2. Opportunities could be sought by which to provide general education and special services staff with increased and regular interaction with the ABA and BCBA personnel for them to better understand the behavior management systems and learn more effective strategies to improve student behavior.
3. As the district currently employs more than the national average of psychologists and will refine psychologist responsibilities to free up more time for student counseling, in-house psychologists could potentially take on some responsibilities for follow through on FBAs and behavior plans. In addition, psychologists could provide support to classroom teachers and special services staff in understanding student FBAs and behavior plans as well as developing districtwide competence in addressing student behavior issues.

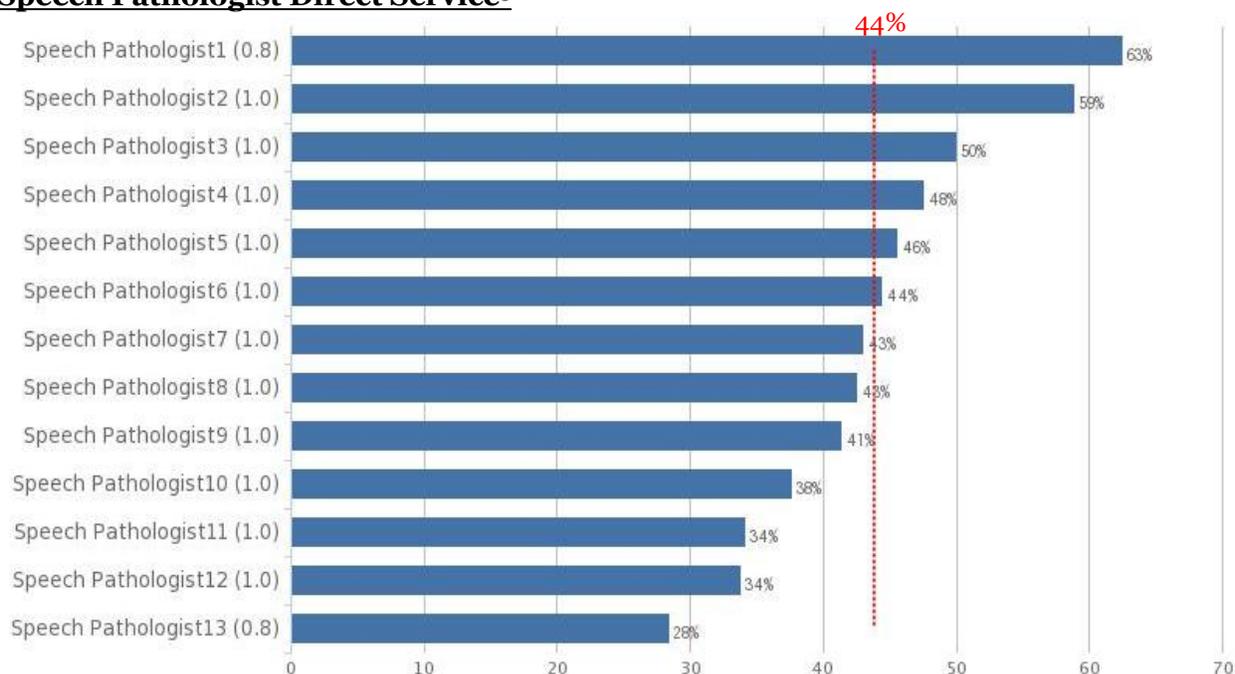
## 5. Consider increasing the amount of time related services staff spend with students, while also closely managing group size through thoughtful scheduling.

Taking a proactive role in managing related services could allow the district to free up funds to add other services without reducing a minute of related services to students.

### 5a. Speech Pathologists

Speech and language pathologists are an important component of many student's IEPs. They spend time working directly with students while also participating in evaluations, report writing, and data analysis.

#### Speech Pathologist Direct Service<sup>3</sup>



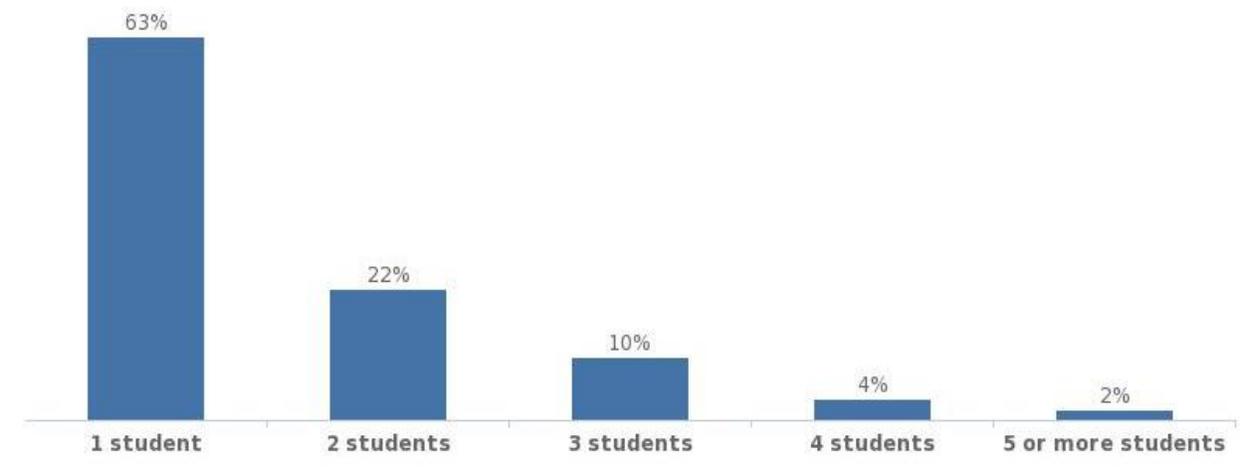
The average speech pathologist spends 44% of their time during the week with students and serves 23 students. In some districts a speech pathologist is expected to spend 75% of their time with students with a typical caseload of over 50 students.

The low caseload in Wilton Public Schools is a consequence of much time in meetings and doing paperwork, coupled with providing much service 1:1. Speech therapists provide 63% of their services 1:1. Staff discussed that student grouping typically only happens when students share a classroom and similar area of need.

Research published by The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) revealed that an effective teaching environment can be created with 2 students per teacher if the disability is severe and 3 students to 1 teacher for more typical needs. The research warns against groups of more than 5 students.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Direct service is calculated based on the percent of time spent with students in the contracted work week.

## Speech Pathologist Group Size

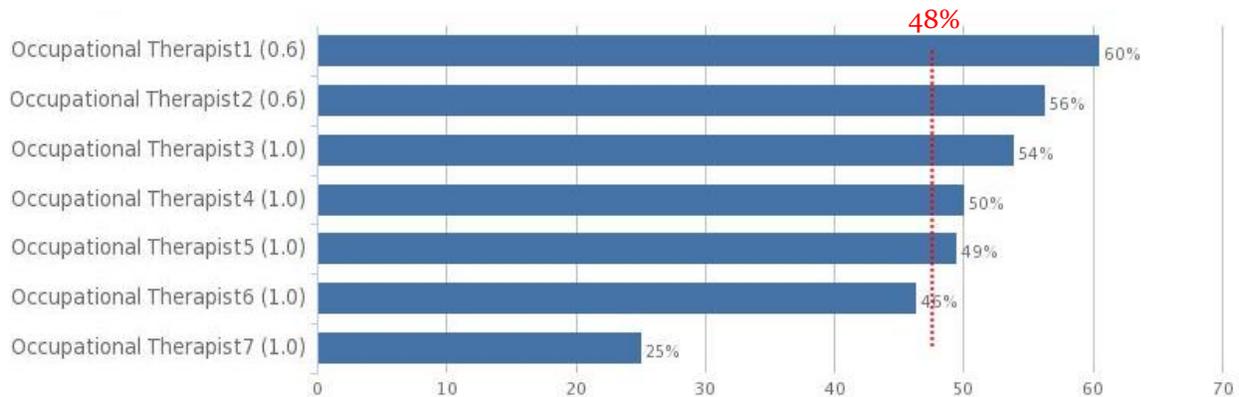


- The current average group size for speech services is 1.6 students.

## **5b. Occupational Therapists**

Much like speech pathologists, occupational therapists provide very important services to students with disabilities, and also have other responsibilities.

### Occupational Therapist Direct Service

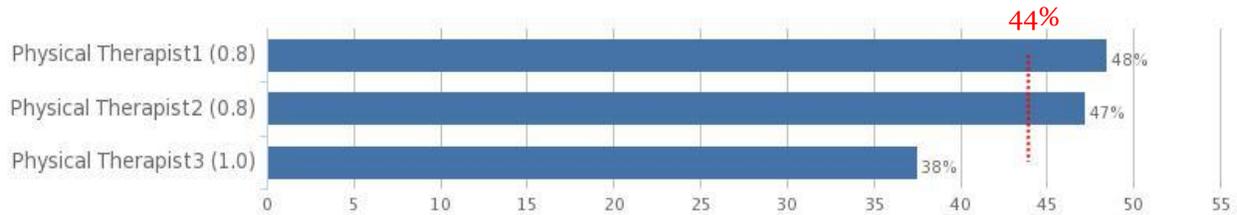


- The average occupational therapist spends 48% of their time with students.

### 5c. Physical Therapists

Physical therapists have quite similar schedules to those of occupational therapists and speech and language pathologists. The 2.6 FTE of physical therapists in the district provide an average of 44% direct service to students, with practitioners ranging from below 38% to 48%.

#### Physical Therapist Direct Service



- The average physical therapist spends 44% of their time with students.

### 5d. Potential Financial Impact

The emphasis on small group sizes coupled with indirect service activities accounting for more than half of their week are two significant factors contributing to Wilton Public Schools having more than twice the FTE of related service staff than like districts, adjusted for enrollment.

A benchmarking analysis comparing the district’s related services staffing levels to like districts across the nation indicated that Wilton Public Schools has significantly more than the average number of related services staff.

#### Staffing Levels Compared to like Districts

Role	FTE per 1,000 students		
	District	Like communities	Multiple
Speech pathologists	2.9	1.8	1.6x
Occupational therapists	1.4	0.7	2.2x
Physical therapists	0.6	0.3	2.0x

- The district has 1.6x, 2.2x, and 2.0x the FTE of speech pathologists, OT, and PT respectively.

Rethinking the method for assigning speech pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists to students could free up limited resources without reducing support to students.

- By adjusting speech pathologists staffing levels to those of similar per pupil spending communities, Wilton Public Schools could repurpose approximately \$575,000.
- As an alternative, by increasing the average direct service time of all speech pathologists from 44% to 75% and increasing the average group size from 1.6 to 2.0 students, Wilton Public Schools could realize approximately \$817,000 that could be used towards other initiatives.
- By adjusting occupational therapist staffing levels to those of similar communities, Wilton Public Schools could free approximately \$410,000.
- By adjusting physical therapist staffing levels to those of similar communities, Wilton Public Schools could repurpose approximately \$168,000.

## **6. Consider streamlining the paperwork and meetings for special services staff.**

As the district moves to best practice service delivery models, district leaders can set explicit expectations for how services are provided, how much time in a day staff provide instruction and how many students are helped at once by a teacher. These service delivery, workload, and group size guidelines are very common in general education, but less so in special education.

All activities are important, yet few districts actively manage the distribution of this time for special education and related services staff. For comparison, in general education all trade-offs between student time and indirect time are set by the district leadership, such as the number of courses taught by a high school math teacher and how much planning time the math teacher is provided.

Actively managing direct student support hours and the time staff spend on indirect tasks such as paperwork, IEP writing, meetings, and travel can have a significant impact on staffing and students. By taking steps to streamline their indirect workload, special education and related services staff can spend more time with students.

Staff frequently shared how PPT related activities often prevented them from servicing students as frequently as they felt was necessary for effective support. Schedule analysis supported this staff concern, capturing that staff are currently allocating close to three days per week to these indirect activities. Staff spend nearly 10% of their week in meeting (4 hours), and also make a significant time investment into IEP writing and paperwork (14%).

### **Special Education Teacher Activities**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Time Spent</b>
Student instruction or support	42%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>42%</b>
IEP writing / Paperwork	14%
Planning / materials preparation	8%
Attend meeting (PPT)	5%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	5%
Personal lunch	4%
Collaboration with colleagues	4%
Parent communication	3%
IEP testing / assessment	3%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	2%
Conducting or scoring academic assessments	2%
Professional development	1%
Creating / Monitoring academic initiatives	0%
Student observation	0%
Travel	0%
Under/over reported	7%
<b>Total Indirect Service</b>	<b>58%</b>

- On average, special education teachers spend 42% of their time directly supporting students.
- 14% of the work week is dedicated to IEP writing and paperwork.
- 10% of their week is spent in meetings.

Similar to special education teachers, related services staff schedules indicate that over half of their week is dedicated to indirect tasks.

**Related Services Staff Activities**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% Time Spent</b>
Therapy with students	45%
<b>Total Direct Service</b>	<b>45%</b>
IEP writing / Paperwork	8%
Attend meeting (other than PPT)	8%
Planning / materials preparation	7%
Attend meeting (PPT)	6%
Personal lunch	6%
Collaboration with colleagues	5%
IEP testing / assessment	4%
Assigned school duties (i.e. bus duty, lunch duty, etc.)	3%
Medicaid billing / service documentation	2%
Parent communication	2%
Student observation	1%
504 writing / Paperwork	1%
Conducting or scoring academic assessments	1%
Travel	0%
504 testing / assessment	0%
Under/over reported	2%
<b>Total Indirect Service</b>	<b>55%</b>

- On average, related service staff spend 45% of their time directly supporting students.
- Staff spend 14% of their work week in meetings.

## **Streamlining indirect responsibilities**

Special services staff discussed their concern for the amount of time required to fulfill current PPT requirements, while also meeting communication expectations with teachers and families. As the district considers implementing the SRBI handbook and extending the reach of its most effective special education teachers, streamlining indirect responsibilities must be addressed before increasing the amount of time special education and related services staff spend with students.

For IEP writing in particular, it is common that as state regulations change, special services staff *add* work in compliance with these regulations, without understanding that previous regulations no longer apply. It is not uncommon for staff who have been in the role for quite some time to be writing IEPs that align with state regulations from 1995, as well as the new regulations from 2015. Additionally, varying degrees of comfort with reading and analyzing data can make a big impact on the time it takes to interpret test results and relate that to IEP goals.

To tackle these issues of streamlining indirect responsibilities districts can apply an approach called process mapping. By engaging a group of staff familiar with the process and mapping out each step, districts can then apply structured problem-solving techniques to optimize the sequence and approach for each step, as described below:

1. Most likely within your group of special services staff there are varying strengths and weaknesses within case management, IEP writing, and other indirect responsibilities. By gathering together a group of special services staff from each school, with a range of years of experience as special services staff, the wisdom of the group can be shared.
2. The group can walk through the steps of the annual review process, initial referral, and other key tasks in great detail. The work begins by mapping out and naming each separate step of the process. At every step, the group shares the range of time they spend on this step, and how they complete this activity.
3. Often districts find that typically one staff member has been doing Step X in a very efficient way, while another staff member has an efficient approach to Step Y, while others may have been doing Step Z which is now obsolete. By combining the efficient processes and knowledge of the group, districts can create an optimized process with recommended time required for each step.

Creating district-specific best practice guides for the PPT process, clarifying involvement in, and frequency of meetings, as well as developing common parent communication plans can help streamline the amount of time dedicated to each of these tasks, and increase the amount of time staff can spend with students.

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<sup>1</sup> DeNisco, Alison. “Psychological stress on schools: How to work around tight budgets so the school counselor’s job is done right.” *District Administration*. February 2015.

<sup>2</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “A Workload Analysis Approach for Establishing Speech-Language Caseload Standards in the School: Technical Report.” (2002).