

SCHOOL BOARD MEMO #17-18-61

DATE: 1/08/2018

TO: Members of the West Fargo School Board

FROM: Dr. David Flowers, Beth Slette, Karen Nickel, and Mark Lemer

RE: Day Program Planning

FOCUS: This memo includes an update on options to expand services for students with behavioral and mental health needs

In recent years, our region has seen an increase in the frequency of students with significant behavioral and mental health needs. As a result, our special education programs have had to develop new and innovative strategies to meet these needs. Unfortunately, many of these students need services that go beyond a traditional education setting. Ultimately, to meet their overall behavioral, social and emotional needs and to have them achieve success, we need the support of staff from the fields of medicine, behavioral health and social services. The information in this memo is intended to provide general information on the perceived needs of the educational community in our region, and how we might meet these needs for our school district and other districts in the region.

Our district offers a wide-range of special education programs and services to students and their families beginning at age 3 and through age 21. Our special education and related services staff provides instruction and support to students with identified disabilities in the least restrictive environment, to the maximum extent appropriate with nondisabled peers and access to the general education curriculum. A continuum of services and placements are available in all areas of disability in West Fargo Public Schools. The Individual Education Program (IEP) team, including parents, determines the most appropriate setting and services based on the student's unique needs. However, of the 1,368 students in special education there is a small population of students in the areas of Emotionally Disturbed (ED) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who continue to demonstrate complex behaviors even with the most intensive of interventions in the school setting. We are struggling to provide an appropriate environment for these students.

North Dakota aligns with the federal guidelines for creating a continuum of services, or levels, based on the student's least restrictive environment (LRE). North Dakota refers to *LRE placements*; Minnesota refers to *levels* (see below):

Description of Placement	North Dakota	Minnesota
Inside regular class 80% or more of day	LRE A	Level 1
Inside regular class no more than 79% of day but no less than 40% of day	LRE B	Level 2
Inside regular class for less than 40% of day	LRE C	Level 3
Separate school	LRE D	Level 4
Residential facility	LRE E	
Homebound/hospital	LRE F	
Correctional facility	LRE G	
Parentally placed in private schools	LRE H	

Federal Law on LRE includes a LRE D for students that need an alternative placement. Currently, we have three self-contained programs (LRE C) at the elementary level, and we will be adding a fourth later this month. The problem is we do not have a LRE D setting, yet we have students transferring from Minnesota schools with a Level 4 placement. We also have students in the LRE C that are not being successful, and we have no alternative for them at this time. We currently have 15-20 students that would benefit from a LRE D placement.

Another piece of data that provides compelling support for a LRE D setting can be seen below. When staff members are injured due to student behaviors, they are asked to complete an incident report, which is filed in the human resources department. The principal of the school debriefs with the injured party and determines if the incident could have been prevented or if additional training is needed. Below are charts showing the number of incident reports filed from 2015-2017:

December 2015-December 2017:

August – December 2017	61
August – December 2016	52
August – December 2015	27

Past two school years (August – May):

2016 – 2017	125
2015 - 2016	68

It is concerning to see the number of reports double from December of 2015 to December of 2017. While these numbers include secondary students, there were only 5 incidents reported this year from secondary compared to 56 from elementary. Students with complex behaviors at the secondary level have the option to attend a LRE D program within the State, including the Dakota Boys & Girls Ranch program in Fargo. We currently do not have programming for elementary students, which may be one reason for the number of incidences in our elementary schools.

We are not alone when it comes to the challenges of meeting the needs of students with complex behaviors. After speaking with leaders from other districts, a group developed to study the idea of a day program. Leaders from southeast area of North Dakota including Fargo, Wahpeton, the Rural Cass Special Education Unit, the South Valley Special Education Unit, the South East Education Cooperative (SEEC), have been meeting for approximately eight months. Beth Slette, Karen Nickel, and Mark Lemer have attended these meetings on behalf of West Fargo. The primary work of the group has been to develop a model program for K-8 students who present a complex array of behavioral needs that require very specialized behavioral, mental health, and academic programming. The discussions have led to consensus that new options be considered, including the possibility of a new facility that would be designed architecturally and programmatically to meet these student's academic and behavioral needs. Additional services at the facility would include outreach and engagement of parents, connection with community organizations, support by mental health professionals, and specialized training opportunities for district staff to allow for transitions back into the student's home district.

On January 9, administrators in the region will receive a survey regarding their district's needs, student numbers, resources, and desire to collaborate to create a regional day program for students needing an LRE D setting. This information will guide our next steps moving forward.

We will continue to update you on our progress at future meetings.