

3-2018

# Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering Special Education Programs and Services in Maine

Janet C. Fairman Ph.D.

*University of Southern Maine, Maine Education Policy Research Institute*

Mary Ellen Seymour M.Ed.

*University of Southern Maine, Maine Education Policy Research Institute*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare\\_state](http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare_state)



Part of the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Fairman, Janet C. Ph.D. and Seymour, Mary Ellen M.Ed., "Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering Special Education Programs and Services in Maine" (2018). *State of Education*. 13.

[http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare\\_state/13](http://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare_state/13)

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Education Policy, Applied Research and Evaluation (CEPARE) at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in State of Education by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

Study of a Regional Approach for Delivering  
Special Education Programs and Services in Maine



Prepared by:

Janet Fairman, Ph.D.

Mary Ellen Seymour, M.Ed.

March 2018

Maine Education Policy Research Institute

University of Maine

Orono, Maine



Published by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute in the College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine.

MEPRI was established to conduct nonpartisan studies on Maine education policy and the Maine public education system for the Maine Legislature.

Statements and opinions by the authors do not necessarily reflect a position or policy of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, nor any of its members, and no official endorsement by them should be inferred.

The University of Maine does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin or citizenship status, age, disability, or veteran's status and shall comply with Section 504, Title IX, and the A.D.A in employment, education, and in all other areas of the University. The University provides reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities upon request.

This study was funded by the Maine State Legislature, and the University of Maine System

Copyright © 2018

College of Education and Human Development  
University of Maine, 5766 Shibles Hall, Orono, Maine 04469-5766 (207) 581-2475  
*A Member of the University of Maine System*

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Introduction .....	1
Rationale for the Study .....	1
Methodology.....	4
Findings .....	6
Regional Programs Across Maine .....	6
Southern Penobscot Regional Program .....	7
History of the Program.....	7
Description of Services.....	8
Assignment and Coordination of Services for Students .....	11
Membership and Governance .....	13
Western Maine Collaborative .....	13
History of the Program.....	13
Description of Services.....	14
Assignment and Coordination of Services for Students .....	17
Membership and Governance .....	17
Cost Considerations for Regional Services.....	18
Perceptions regarding Benefits of a Regional Approach .....	21
Perceptions of Potential Challenges with a Regional Approach.....	27
Thoughts for Other Districts Considering Regional Collaboration.....	30
Thoughts about State Policy .....	32
Conclusions and Implications for Policy.....	37
Bibliography .....	41
Author Information.....	42
Appendices.....	43

## Executive Summary

**Introduction:** At the request of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs of the Maine State Legislature, the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted a study of school districts’ use of a regional approach for delivering special education programs and services in Maine. Regionalization has been of particular interest in Maine which has a large number of small school districts, decreasing enrollments, and rising costs in education—particularly for special education programs services. In 2017-18, a legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services offered recommendations to address many different challenges related to special education (Maine State Legislature, 2018). Some of the Task Force recommendations directly reinforce findings from this study: acute shortages in special education teachers and specialists, need for improved funding of special education, and the need to review and improve the MaineCare billing system and to reduce the burden for districts seeking reimbursement from federal funding.

**Background Literature:** Relatively little empirical research exists on the subject of regional programs and services for special education. A study conducted in the mid-1980s reviewed findings from multiple studies of rural regional collaboratives in various states and found both positive benefits for districts and students as well as some challenges and negative experiences for some districts (Helge, 1984). A MEPRI study conducted over a decade ago found broad support among superintendents and directors of special education for the idea of a regional approach and documented some initial accomplishments of three regional groups funded by start-up grants from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) in 2004 (MEPRI, 2006).

**Research Methods:** A case study design was used to examine two of the seven regional collaboratives in Maine—the **Western Maine Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities** that recently formed under the state’s EMBRACE initiative for regionalization in education and the **Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities** (SPRPCE) in central Maine that has been successfully operating for nearly 40 years. Interviews were conducted with a sample of superintendents, program coordinators, and directors of special services from participating districts. Additional information was collected through program documents including policies, interlocal agreements, and the EMBRACE application for the Western Maine Collaborative. The MDOE’s Director of Special Services was interviewed and additional data were also collected from the MDOE. Three research questions framed this study:

- 1) To what extent do school districts in Maine utilize a regional approach to deliver special education services to students?
- 2) How are regional programs designed and implemented?
- 3) What are the perceptions of district leaders regarding the benefits and challenges associated with a regional approach to special education services?

### **Findings:**

**Regional Programs Across Maine**—There are seven regional collaboratives across different regions of Maine that provide special education programs and services. More are

located in coastal and central Maine than in other regions. Most are very small with under 12 students. One exception is the SPRPCE collaborative, which serves 56 students with disabilities and has 19 district members with more districts soon to join.

Two regional programs were examined through case studies for this report. Both formed out of the desire of school districts to keep students in the public-school system and to increase fiscal efficiencies in special education. The SPRPCE collaborative in central Maine has been operational for nearly 40 years. This regional program currently offers three programs to meet specific needs of students with severe disabilities: a day treatment program for students with autism, behavior or emotional impairments, a multiple disabilities program located in three Bangor schools, and a program for hearing-impaired students. In addition, the collaborative also started an alternative school for middle and secondary students this year with funding through the MDOE's EMBRACE grants for regionalization.

The Western Maine Collaborative is in its first year of implementation under an EMBRACE grant and started with three districts. The collaborative launched with a day treatment program that serves students with autism, behavior or emotional impairments. Ten students from grades 6-12 are currently served. The program hopes to expand to 15-20 students in 2018-19 and to eventually enroll 30 students.

**Cost Considerations**—Regional programs generally charge a lower rate to member districts than to other districts that are not members. They bill based on the total enrollment and actual costs. Some specialist services for students requiring more intensive supports are additional and increase the cost to the sending district. As enrollment increases, a collaborative can realize greater cost efficiencies and savings. Districts can save tuition and transportation costs by using a public, regional collaborative rather than sending students to various private programs. However, cost savings were highly variable and depended on the distance for transporting students and the particular services students needed. Some districts said they saved tuition but not transportation costs for using a regional collaborative. Other districts said their savings was primarily in transportation costs.

Districts reported they generally faced much higher costs for placement in private agencies and had the additional challenge of coping with the system for billing for students covered by MaineCare. The state's SEED program reduces the district subsidy for about one third of the costs billed to MaineCare, which makes it difficult for districts to anticipate their expenses from year to year and to monitor charges for accuracy.

**Perceptions of Benefits**—Districts reported a range of benefits for districts and for students by using a regional, public program for special services. These are consistent with the existing research on this topic. Perceived benefits included the following:

Benefits for Member Districts:

- Significant input into decisions about programs, services, staffing, policies
- Potentially lower tuition costs
- Potentially lower transportation costs
- Opportunity to share professional development in special education
- Opportunity to share knowledge and ideas among professionals
- Ability to serve students within the public-school system

### Benefits for Students:

- Improved access to specialized services
- More favorable staff to student ratios
- Specialized training and expertise of teachers and specialists
- Potentially reduced time in transportation to program
- Increased ability to participate in extra-curricular activities
- Opportunity to interact with a larger peer group sharing the same disability

**Perceptions of Challenges**—Districts also reported some potential challenges with a regional program. The biggest challenge centered around transportation of students, whether for regional programs or other out of district placements. The challenges mentioned included the following:

- Time students spend in transportation to programs and services
- High cost of transportation for a few students
- Need to coordinate daily school schedules for transportation
- Meeting the rising costs of special education generally
- Improving awareness about regional programs
- Transitioning a student back to a sending school
- Finding the best fit for each individual student

While district leaders described some challenges, they expressed the view that the benefits of a regional collaborative outweigh the disadvantages, and they reported satisfaction with their experience as a member of a regional collaborative.

**Suggestions for Districts Considering New Regional Programs:** District administrators offered suggestions for other districts that may be contemplating the development of new regional programs. The advice included the following:

- Putting a governance structure in place for the collaborative
- Taking it slow to develop the collaborative and programs/services
- Visiting other regional collaboratives to learn from their experiences
- Improving awareness among parents, educators, principals, school board members and other stakeholders through visits to the regional program
- Coordinating school schedules and transportation

**Thoughts about State Policy:** Districts shared their thoughts about the role of state education policy to support the needs of special education students and regional programs. The comments fell into three broad categories: 1) support for state efforts to incentivize and support regional programs; 2) requests for state assistance in coping with the financial cost of special education; and 3) and requests for statewide strategies to improve the supply of special education teachers and specialists.

### Support for Regional Programs:

- Desire to continue state incentives and support for regional programs
- Need to “honor existing programs”

- Need to allow flexibility in the design of regional programs to best fit local needs
- Importance of keeping students within the public-school system if possible

#### State Assistance with Financial Costs:

- Districts are struggling with annual increases in costs for special education
- Number of students requiring special services is growing each year
- Costs are difficult to anticipate year to year and can change dramatically based on the needs of a few students
- Transportation costs for out of district placements are high
- MaineCare and SEED program billing reduces state subsidy to districts
- MaineCare and SEED program billing can be difficult to monitor and verify for accuracy

#### Statewide Strategies to Improve Supply of Educators and Specialists:

- Districts perceive a crisis in filling vacant positions in special education
- Need for additional incentives and other strategies to encourage increased enrollment in educator preparation programs and certification of special education teachers, educational technicians, and other specialists to meet the growing staffing needs

**Conclusions and Implications for Policy:** While this study identified a growing number of regional programs for special education across the state of Maine, the number of programs is still small and the number of students served is very small. District leaders have voiced their support for the idea of regionalization and collaboration in special education for more than a decade, according to an earlier MEPRI report (MEPRI, 2006) and the current study. This level of support, together with the many benefits cited by district leaders in this study, suggest that continued state support to encourage and grow regional programs would be a welcome decision. However, district leaders also caution that a one-size-fits-all approach would not work in every region. Flexibility for school districts to develop regional programs that best fit their needs and resources is strongly encouraged. District leaders voiced the strong preference for keeping students in their schools if at all possible, and only sending them out to regional or other programs if they cannot be served in their own schools.

Two overriding challenges have implications for state policy: 1) the high cost for special education programs and transportation, and 2) the short supply in qualified and certified special education teachers and specialists. The complex and challenging problems related to financing the cost of special education (particularly given the range of special services needed for students with more severe disabilities and the cost of transportation of students to out of district placements) are felt nationally and cannot be easily or quickly resolved. Regional collaboration among districts has the potential to reduce some of the costs for districts, but is not a guaranteed outcome. Moreover, financial savings is not the only objective for using a regional approach. Increasing capacity to serve students closer to home is also a goal. Providing the most appropriate support in the least restrictive environment is another important goal.

In addition to the challenge of high costs for special education, the short supply of qualified and certified personnel to provide services to students is an additional barrier to building this capacity. Incentives, higher salaries, dual-certification programs (e.g., providing certification in elementary and special education together), and other strategies to encourage



individuals to pursue careers in special education may eventually improve the supply of teachers and specialists in special education. Multiple and creative strategies will be needed to examine and address these issues in a comprehensive way.

A recent state statutory revision to take effect in July 2018 (Title 20-A MRSA Sec.15681) aims to incentivize districts to use regional public programs for special education services over private programs with the goal of lowering costs. However, the same legislation also creates a perhaps unintended disincentive for districts to keep students in their home schools, because the state reimbursement of costs is triggered more easily for regional public program placements (triggered when the cost exceeds twice the Essential Programs and Services or EPS cost) than for services in a student's home school district (only triggered when the cost exceeds three times the EPS cost). MEPRI studies, including the current case studies, have documented that districts seek to serve students in their own schools when possible. The new statutory language will create tensions for districts that want to determine services based on students' individual needs, rather than state subsidy rules. This situation may warrant further legislative review.

One option that has not been well explored in Maine is the idea of contracting with regional public programs for itinerant specialists as needed to serve students in their home schools. This could have the dual benefit of both keeping students in their own schools and local communities, while providing the necessary level of expertise, equipment, and services to support students appropriately in the less restrictive environment. Contracting for services as needed each year could help districts avoid the challenges and cost of trying to hire and retain permanent specialists. Districts could adjust services as the needs of students change each year. However, this approach again depends on having an adequate supply of qualified professionals.

Another policy option for consideration would be to encourage or require school districts to first seek ways to obtain the resources (staffing, equipment, etc.) needed to serve students in their home schools before they are placed in out of district placements, public or private. As described above, some resources could be obtained by collaborating with a neighboring district or contracting with a regional public program. Serving the growing numbers and more complex needs of Maine's special education students, within the context of a shortage in the supply of special education teachers and specialists, will require thinking outside the box and moving away from traditional ways of delivering services.

Finally, the potential to tap more federal funding through IDEA to offset the cost of special services for students should be explored and perhaps incentivized through state policy. When districts do not bill for all of the eligible services they have provided to students, the cost is instead borne by districts and the state as a whole. This is an area deserving more investigation.

## Introduction

At the request of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs of the Maine State Legislature, the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted a study of school districts' use of a regional approach for delivering special education services in Maine. Regionalization has been of particular interest in Maine which has a large number of small school districts, decreasing enrollments, and rising costs in education—particularly for special education programs services. In 2017-18, a legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services offered recommendations to address many different challenges related to special education (Maine State Legislature, 2018). Some of the Task Force recommendations directly reinforce findings from this study: acute shortages in special education teachers and specialists, need for improved funding of special education, and the need to review and improve the MaineCare billing system and to reduce the burden for districts seeking reimbursement from federal funding.

A case study approach was used to examine two regional collaboratives in Maine—one located in western Maine that recently formed under the state's EMBRACE initiative for regionalization in education and another collaborative in central Maine that has been successfully operating for nearly 40 years. Some statewide data were also collected from the Maine Department of Education (MDOE). This study was one of several MEPRI workplan projects for the FY2018 year. This report presents findings from the study and describes some implications for state policy.

## Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore to what extent and how Maine K-12 school districts currently use a regional approach to deliver special education programs services, as well as district perceptions about the benefits and challenges with a regional approach. A regional system provides services to students from multiple communities and participating school districts, to provide specialized services, often in a central facility. A regional approach is often used with special education students when the sending district has not been able to meet a student's needs in the student's local school or district due to severe cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or mental health issues. Students may attend a regional program on a short-term basis

and then return to the sending district, or they may continue to receive services through the regional program on a long-term basis.

In searching for relevant research literature on this topic, we found little empirical research that focuses on regional special education programs or efforts to regionalize such programs. Several studies have focused on the consolidation or regionalization of school districts, examining the financial outcomes of consolidation (Cox & Cox, 2010; Duncombe & Yinger, 2010), the impacts for student equity and educational opportunities (Berry, 2007; Donis-Keller, O'Hara-Miklavic, & Fairman, 2013), or the process of district consolidation (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012; Ward & Rink, 1992). Other studies have examined the consolidation or regionalization of schools (e.g., Berry & West, 2010; Hicks & Rusalkina, 2004).

We also investigated the literature on other kinds of collaborative effort between school districts. We found some research on collaboration to reduce racial segregation in urban districts and increase diversity and educational opportunity for students (Finnigan, Holme, Orfield, et al, 2015). Two important findings from both the research on school district consolidation and the Finnigan et al study of collaboration to desegregate urban schools may be informative for other kinds of school district collaboration or regional efforts: first, the research found there is a need to consider the social and political context of local communities in developing policies; and second, it is critical to engage local stakeholders in decision-making about new collaborative efforts. A third idea from a study of school consolidation in Maine may also be relevant. That research found that school districts with a history of successful collaboration were more likely to be successful in other kinds of collaboration (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2015). Thus, a foundation of positive relationships between districts can help foster cooperation in various areas.

A study conducted by the National Rural Research Project over three decades ago examined findings from five separate research studies that collected data from multiple rural districts (from 32 to 200 districts) and rural collaboratives across multiple states (Helge, 1984). The study found several benefits from district collaboration to provide special education services in rural settings, including: increased cost efficiency, increased compliance with legal requirements, improved student access to programs, improved teacher retention, and improved parent involvement. However, the study also found some problems with regional collaboration, including: cumbersome governance structures in some cases, decreased local autonomy for some

districts, member dissatisfaction with the collaboration for some districts, uneven district commitment to special education programs, fiscal inequalities, and administrative turnover.

Concerns about rising costs for special education in Maine are not new, nor is the idea of regional programs. More than a decade ago, MEPRI investigated regional programs and services for special education in Maine. A work group on special education was convened by the Maine State Board of Education in 2002 which issued a report with recommendations for program and finance reform in 2003 (MEPRI, 2003). Following that report, MEPRI conducted a study of regional programs and services to identify their goals, accomplishments, and additional opportunities. Data were collected through a statewide survey of directors of special education and through interviews with regional groups of superintendents and directors of special education. The MEPRI study identified a strong level of support for regional programs to: improve access to specialists, provide assessment services, serve low incidence students with severe disabilities, and to provide professional development for special education teachers and technicians (MEPRI, 2006). However, respondents in the study also voiced a strong value of keeping students in their local communities rather than sending them out to more segregated placements. Three regions (Hancock, Kennebec, and the Penobscot River Educational Partnership) received small grants of \$75,000 from the MDOE in 2004 to support regional efforts. For these regional groups, grant funding supported the implementation of shared psychological services for evaluation of students, shared professional development, a computer database, development of a pre-referral process, development of plans for a day treatment program, and the development of a leadership team (MEPRI, 2006). In 2017-18, a legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services offered recommendations to address many different challenges related to special education, including financing special education, addressing the shortage of special education teachers, and reducing the paperwork and administrative burden for special education (Maine State Legislature, 2018).

A study published more recently (Lehr, Tan & Ysseldyke, 2009) included a review of state policies on alternative schools and programs and a national survey of state officials responsible for overseeing alternative schools. This study found that attendance in alternative schools is increasing and comprises a significant portion of students. The researchers learned

about the types of programs and services offered to students in non-traditional educational settings and concluded there is a lack of information about the educational outcomes for these students. The survey of policies and programs for alternative education was conducted at the state level rather than at the local district level.

Given the lack of empirical research that specifically focuses on regionalization of special education programs, there is a need for more studies to understand why school districts create regional programs, how these programs operate, how they are governed, what they cost, how they select students, and what benefits or challenges they create for districts, students and their families.

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study research design as well as statewide data to explore the following questions:

- 4) To what extent do school districts in Maine utilize a regional approach to deliver special education services to students?
- 5) How are regional programs designed and implemented?
- 6) What are the perceptions of district leaders regarding the benefits and challenges associated with a regional approach to special education services?

To answer the first question, we conducted an interview with the Director of Special Services in the MDOE in the fall of 2017 and collected information from the MDOE on regional programs across the state.

To investigate the second and third questions, we selected two regional programs in the state to conduct case studies. These were:

1) the Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities (or SPRPCE program), currently coordinated by the Bangor School Department, which has operated since 1979, and

2) the Western Maine Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities (referred to as the Western Maine Collaborative in this report), coordinated by MSAD 17 Oxford Hills School District, which began implementation just this fall 2017.

These programs were purposefully selected as they were among the larger collaboratives in terms of the number of school districts served and regional reach. In addition, these two programs offered the potential to contrast practices in different regions or contexts in Maine (one is more urban/ suburban while the other is more rural), as well as the opportunity to compare the experiences and views of districts in a well-established regional program with those of a newly-formed regional collaborative.

In fall 2017, we made site visits to the two regional program centers and conducted interviews with staff and administrators for the two regional programs. We also conducted phone interviews with a sample of other district administrators (superintendents and directors of special services) that are members of the collaboratives. Other administrators provided responses to questions by email. In total, we interviewed seven administrators from three districts from the SPRPCE program, and one staff member and four administrators from two of the three districts comprising the Western Maine Collaborative. Additional information was collected through program documents including policies, interlocal agreements, and the EMBRACE application for the Western Maine Collaborative. We had hoped to interview special education teachers in both programs but that was not feasible given the difficulty of finding free time during their busy workday. Another perspective that is missing from this study is that of parents and students.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the study through the University of Maine. All participants were provided with a brief description of the study's purpose and informed consent information. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for accuracy. In this report we describe the job roles of participants when including quotations but not their district affiliation in order to protect individual identities. In a few cases, where the job roles are unique, such as the MDOE Director of Special Services and administrators who coordinate the regional programs, it was not possible to completely de-identify the data. A draft of this report was shared with participants for their review and feedback. The interview data, along with other relevant program documentation, were utilized to develop a narrative description of each program's history and implementation. Further, recurring themes related to benefits and challenges were identified and are discussed in this report.

## Findings

In this section, we first provide a quick look at the use of regional programs across the state of Maine, and a state-level perspective. Next, we describe each of the two regional programs for special education services, providing an overview of why and how they were formed, how they are organized and governed, what types of services they offer, and size in staffing and student enrollment. Then we describe perceptions of district leaders about the benefits and challenges of a regional approach for special education. Finally, we offer observations and suggestions from district leaders related to state policy.

### **Regional Programs Across Maine**

According to information provided by the Maine Department of Education, we learned there are currently seven regional programs for special education services that have been approved by the state and implemented. The operational programs cover several different geographic regions of Maine, including the following counties: Southern Penobscot (Bangor region), Lincoln (Damariscotta), Lincoln (Wiscasset), Androscoggin (Auburn), York (Old Orchard Beach and Saco), Oxford (South Paris), and Aroostook (Presque Isle). One more regional program is pending approval and is located in Oxford County (Dixfield). The Dixfield program has applied for funding under the EMBRACE program. The EMBRACE program (Enabling Maine Students to Benefit from Regional and Coordinated Approaches to Education) was initiated by an executive order from Governor LePage to incentivize school districts to develop collaborative efforts to improve efficiency in delivering educational services. Seven awards through this program were made to districts across the state in spring 2017.

The size of the regional collaboratives varies, ranging from only two School Administrative Units (SAUs) in the Presque Isle collaborative to 19 SAUs partnering in the Bangor region. The number of special education students served by the operational programs varies across programs. Our attempts to contact program directors by email to enquire about enrollments produced information for five of the seven regional programs. According to these programs, their current enrollment ranged from five K-8 students to 56 students K-12, with most programs reporting enrollments under 12 students.

According to the MDOE's Director of Special Services, regional programs provide an array of different kinds of programs and services to students with special needs, such as

intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, hearing impaired students, and students with behavior problems. The Director noted that regional programs can sometimes better serve students' needs when they cannot be met in the student's district of residence. But there can be increased costs for fees or transportation for participating districts.

The challenges for regional programs described by the Director were related to the fact that Maine is a very rural state. Within that context, the geographic distance between districts is often substantial and results in longer bus rides for students being transported between districts for services. Schools use various means of transporting students, including taxis, vans, or buses, which is expensive. The Director reflected that figuring out how to manage the transportation piece in a cost-efficient way is still a question to be answered.

Another challenge mentioned by the Director is determining the leadership for regional programs. Districts that wish to partner must decide who will be the fiscal agent and take on the leadership role of coordinating the program. Districts that are very small may feel they lack the personnel to take on this role.

Relationships between the cooperating districts, another important factor noted by the Director, can impact how well districts collaborate. Existing relationships can make it more likely that neighboring districts will collaborate, or less likely. This view is supported by the research on school district consolidation mentioned earlier in this report.

Finally, no matter how districts seek to serve special education students, the ability to fill vacant positions for special education teachers and specialists has been a serious challenge for districts across Maine and nationally. This is a complex issue that will require innovative strategies at the state level.

## **Southern Penobscot Regional Program**

**History of the Program.** The Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities (SPRPCE) is a regional collaborative that formed with multiple school districts in the Bangor region in 1978, with the first year of implementation in 1979. Districts used interlocal agreements as the basis for their partnership. The primary reasons for starting the regional program, as described in the interviews and program documents, included:

- the need to comply with new federal and state regulations for special education;



- the goal to provide the most appropriate services to meet students’ needs through a public education program, rather than sending students to private programs; and
- the need to obtain cost efficiencies for special education services.

The collaborative, which is based on interlocal agreements, currently includes 19 SAU members and 15 superintendents and is one of the largest in the state. Another 4 or 5 SAUs are expected to join the collaborative by fall 2018 and are developing their interlocal agreements now. For several decades, the Old Town School District (now RSU 34) managed and housed the program. In the past four years, the Bangor School Department took on that role. Districts partnering in this collaborative agreed to look for a new location to house some parts of this program when they faced considerable expense to renovate an older building that housed the program. The Day Treatment Program facility is located in Bangor. Other students are served in Bangor schools. At the same time that Bangor took on the coordination of the program, the member districts agreed to shift from having an external executive officer manage the collaborative to having a leadership team model. Non-member districts also utilize the services offered through SPRPCE and may send students from other counties as well.

**Description of Services.** This regional collaborative includes four distinct programs: three specifically for students with special needs and one for at risk students that may include students with special needs. These programs are described here:

1. Day Treatment Program: This program primarily serves K-12 students with significant behavior impairment and emotional disabilities. Some students have autism and others have health or emotional issues. Some of the specialized services offered on site includes social skills instruction and clinical counseling. Occupational, physical, and speech therapies can also be provided on site. A program administrator explained, “Every student in our building has a behavior plan that we’re working on, on a regular basis to support them. And teaching them the coping skills that they need in order to self-regulate themselves.” Staff also communicate this goal with students. The administrator said,
 

We’re very honest with students from day one when they arrive here. Our goal is to get you back. Our goal is to get you to know yourself so that you know what you need, so that you can articulate that in any setting. That’s important.

The program is located in a stand-alone facility near the Bangor Airport. It includes a permanent building, a modular classroom, playground, multipurpose room, and other treatment rooms. Students are grouped in classrooms by grade ranges (K-2, 3-5, 6-7, 7-8, and 9-12). The largest classroom this year has seven students and two staff members. The staff to student ratio may vary depending on the needs of the students, but is approximately 1 staff to 1.6 students, on average.

2. Multiple Disabilities Program: This program serves K-12 students with severe cognitive delays and/ or physical impairments. These students need assistance with all activities of daily living and numerous students are wheelchair bound. Students attend one of three different schools in the Bangor district which includes one elementary, one middle school, and one high school building. Students are in self-contained classrooms and participate in the regular education program as appropriate. Most students have a teacher or nurse/ educational technician assisting them throughout the school day with a staff to student ratio of approximately 1:1. Staff with nursing credentials attend to both the medical and educational needs of the student, in conjunction with a teacher. Teachers working within a multiple disabilities classroom have a specific endorsement that allows them to develop education programs for students with significant, cognitive delays. Occupational, speech, and other therapies are provided as needed.
3. Hearing Impaired Program: This program is designed to serve K-12 students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Students are integrated into Bangor schools that are mainstreamed. There are currently no students enrolled in this program.
4. Innovation School: While this is not technically a program to deliver special education services, students with IEPs may be eligible to enroll. This new program, in its first year of implementation, is part of the SPRPCE collaborative and offers an alternative school for middle and secondary students. The program was launched with a grant of \$538,235 in start-up funding through an EMBRACE grant from the MDOE. Students who are academically at risk are recommended for the program by a school team. Another team interviews and selects students for the program. A program administrator described criteria for student referral this way:

Students who are struggling to be engaged in their academics. They need more of a hands-on approach to learning. Students that are struggling to come to school on a regular basis. Or those students who are looking to go to a trade path instead of the college path.

Students in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades participated in the program this year. By next year, the program will also serve students in grade 9<sup>th</sup>. Eventually, the program will include students in grades 7 through 10. The regional program partners with United Technologies Center (UTC) and Eastern Maine Community College (EMCC). The program is located at EMCC in two classrooms, each with a teacher. Students have access to a maker space for hands-on, experiential learning. The staff to student ratio is roughly 9:1 for this program. Students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> would attend programs in UTC. Ultimately, the program seeks to motivate students to pursue post-secondary education, potentially at EMCC.

Member or other participating districts are responsible for providing transportation to the program facilities for students participating in the SPRPCE regional programs. The number of students served by these programs fluctuates, as students enter the program from their home districts at different times of the school year, and most reach a point where they can return to their school/ district of residence. Table 1 below shows the approximate numbers of students enrolled in the SPRPCE programs this school year and staffing levels. In addition to special education teachers and educational technicians, these programs employ other specialists, including: a social worker, a part time occupational therapist, a part time speech and language therapist, and two nurses for the multiple disabilities program. A psychologist and BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst) are available as needed for consults. A director of special services from the Bangor district oversees the three special education programs in SPRPCE with additional administrative staff. The Day Treatment Program has a full-time director. The Bangor district adult education director oversees the Innovation School. Principals help to oversee programs in their schools.

**Table 1. SPRPCE Enrollment and Staffing**

Program	Students 2017-18	# Reg. Ed Teachers	# SPED Teachers	# Ed Techs	# Other Staff Specialists
Day Treatment	45	--	7	20	3+
Multiple Disabilities	11	--	3	7	1+
Hearing Impaired	0	--	--	--	--
Innovation School	18	2	--	1	--
Totals:	74	2	10	28	4+

Enrollment reported by SPRPCE as of March 2018.

In addition to professional development that member districts provide to their teaching staff, the collaborative also offers professional development to special education teachers and educational technicians from member districts. Recent topics have included: how to be an effective educational technician, supporting students with Autism, administering functional behavioral assessments, doing classroom observations, training on occupational therapy, and strategies to help students manage anxiety at home and at school. SPRPCE staff also receive on-site professional development for an hour each month and have time before or after school each day for brief trainings. Some staff training, primarily on safety issues, also occurs in late summer prior to the opening of school.

**Assignment and Coordination of Services for Students.** Students are referred to a SPRPCE regional program by their local school IEP team. Sending schools might determine that a student needs special services that are not available within the district, or that the student may need a more restrictive environment. Typically, directors of special services would examine the student's functional data and determine what was working or not working well for the student. A formal application and relevant documentation is submitted to the program for review. Administrators from member districts also confirmed that multiple individuals would be involved in a placement decision. One director of special services explained,

Certainly, we involve all of those players who would be involved in an IEP team. The parent, teachers, administrators. And usually there are multiple steps in that process. We try to put lots of supports in place in the regular school setting before we're looking at a

change in placement. But it's very much an IEP team process and an IEP team's decision. We would agree as an IEP team that we want to hold a meeting with a regional program. We would then contact the regional program, and talk to them a little bit about the student, and set up a meeting with both our staff and the parent, as well as the regional program. And then discuss and determine placement [with] everybody at the table.

Another director of special services indicated that his district first tries to address a student's needs within district if possible, but sometimes recommends placement outside the district when a student's behavior becomes unmanageable.

The decision is multi-faceted, but it's always driven by the IEP team. . . . We would do whatever we had to in district to maintain the student. So, we'd increase levels of supports. We'd bring in a behavioral consultant. We would tap on all of our local resources to determine if a student is responding to that intervention or not. If a student's behavior continues to be at a level where we deemed it to be unsafe, or not manageable within the public school setting, we would have a conversation with the family, with the team, with the IEP team, including the parent and the classroom teacher, special education teacher, and administrator. And we would go to an IEP meeting and talk about what the student's needs are and where that need can be met in the least restrictive setting.

Students, their families, and the student's IEP team are invited to visit the SPRPCE program prior to starting to help students with the transition. Once students are placed in a program, the team expands to include SPRPCE teachers and staff and the IEP is reviewed periodically. The team also continues to coordinate with the sending school's psychologist or behavior specialist during the student's participation in the regional program and throughout the transition back to the school of residence, for the Day Treatment Program for example. In an interview, a program administrator explained, "Our goal is to do intensive work with students, teach them what works well, and how to regulate their bodies so that they can maintain [that], and get them back to their sending district as soon as possible." During the 2016-17 school year, 11 out of 38 students in the Day Treatment Program transitioned back to their sending schools. Some students spend 6-7 months in the Day Treatment program and then return to their sending schools, while others may spend 1-2 years in the program or even longer.

**Membership and Governance.** The governance structure for the SPRPCE collaborative includes four levels:

1. Board of Directors: This group includes one elected school board member from each of the member districts. The group meets quarterly and provides final approval of proposals and approves policies.
2. Executive Officers: These include superintendents from member districts. The group meets monthly or more often and may recommend budget and policy changes to the Board of Directors.
3. Leadership Team: This group takes the role of what would in other collaboratives be an Executive Director. It includes the Superintendent and Director of Special Services from Bangor district, and Director of the Day Treatment Program. The group meets to develop meeting agendas, reviews policies and suggests changes to the Executive Officers.
4. Regional Advisory Board (RAB): This group includes the directors of special services from all the participating school districts. The group meets once a month and plans shared professional development for teachers and staff.

Communications with member and sending districts occur through these regular meetings. The director of the Day Treatment Program and the Leadership Team also provide direct communications with member districts. In the interviews, administrators from member districts confirmed that they were satisfied with the frequency of communications about the program and about individual students' progress.

### **Western Maine Collaborative**

**History of the Program.** Western Maine Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities was implemented in fall 2017. Three SAUs are partners in this collaborative: MSAD 17 (Oxford Hills), MSAD 72 (Fryeburg), and MSAD 44 (Bethel). MSAD 17 is the largest district and serves as the fiscal agent for the collaborative. MSAD 17 coordinates the program and houses the program within the district. The other two smaller school districts are about 25-30 miles from MSAD 17. According to district leaders we interviewed and the application to the state, the primary reasons they sought to create this regional program included:

- the desire to shorten the bus commute for participating students;

- the goal to keep students closer and within the public school system and district, rather than sending them to private programs;
- the need to provide appropriate services to students with special needs; and
- the need to achieve cost efficiencies, particularly on transportation costs.

Some of the constraints these districts sought to overcome included a lack of space in their middle school to accommodate students with autism, and the lack of specialized programs within district that meant students had to travel to a variety of private programs some distance from their home district.

District leaders cited the unique opportunity to obtain an incentive grant through the MDOE's EMBRACE program, which provided \$344,000 in start-up funding for one year for programs that regionalize services. After the first year, member districts will need to support the cost of the program through tuition fees. A director of special services explained, "We all came together. We've been looking at doing something for a regional program for a couple of years now. And when the money came forward, that was a better incentive for us." Interlocal agreements outline the responsibilities of members and the parameters of the collaborative program.

There was a challenge to find a suitable facility in time for the program to start in fall 2017. While the collaborative had a building in mind to purchase, they were not able to make that acquisition in time for the start of the school year. This meant that a substantial portion of the grant funding was needed to renovate an existing school building. The grant was also used to cover salary for a program director and equipment for the program.

**Description of Services.** Students attending this new regional program are served through one broad program but receive services according to their IEP requirements. The new program consists of a Day Treatment Program for students in grades 6-12 and currently serves 10 students. Two populations of students are served: students with autism and students with emotional, mental health, or significant behavior impairments who were not successful in the day treatment programs located in their middle or high schools. For now, students in lower elementary grades or with multiple and more severe disabilities cannot be accommodated in the regional program and must still be placed in out of district private programs. District leaders and staff hope to increase the enrollment in the collaborative program to 15-20 students next year,

and ultimately serve about 30 students eventually. In addition to the three member districts, other districts in the region have contacted the program director to inquire about sending their students.

One of the unique elements of the program described in the interviews includes the use of a hands-on approach to education, which is supported by fieldtrips to a local farm for experiential learning. The farm is located on a land trust and is open to the public. Students visit the farm twice a week. Secondary grade students also have the option to attend a tech program at the regional high school for part of the day. The program provides the necessary transportation for these day trips. Program staff expressed the view that authentic learning is important for students and that was a goal in designing the new regional program.

Another unique aspect of the new program is the inclusion of concepts from restorative justice into the pedagogical approach and teaching philosophy. This as an innovative approach that emphasizes positive behavior management rather than a behavior modification approach which may feel more punitive to students. The program director described it this way:

Restorative practices are based on the idea that we need to start with positive relationships. We need to start building relationships. We need to start by building rapport. And in the end, we want kids to do the right thing, because it's the right thing to do, and not because they expect a reward.

Staff feel this approach holds promise for programs serving students with behavior problems. The program director explained, "We are a very young program, but we've gotten, especially with a few select kids, we've gotten some really amazing results that they were not getting in the more traditional programs."

Secondary level students in this collaborative program may also attend technical education for part of the day in the local comprehensive high school. The regional program director noted the importance of being able to include students with special needs in various tech programs.

Our idea was that our kids could benefit from this too. So we developed that relationship with the tech school, so that our kids, with support, can go to the program. For example, we have a kid right now who is really into digital videos, and he's going to advanced communication class. He's going every other day, for about half the day, to the tech



school. And we send an ed tech with him, and he is very successful with his academics over there.

Other tech programs that were of interest to students included the culinary program, diversified occupations which includes carpentry and other skills, and growing food in the greenhouse. The partnership with the tech program provides additional opportunities for students with special needs to interact with students from the regular education program.

In addition to the tech program, staff seek other opportunities for students in the regional program to interact with their local community and learn life skills. For example, students visit local sites and businesses in the community, such as a local pet store. Staff are collaborating with middle and high school teachers to find ways to involve individual students in particular programs like the music program, or to participate in person or virtually in high school courses, to best meet individual student needs and interests. As the regional program is still new, these efforts will continue to develop and expand.

Participating districts must provide transportation for students to attend the regional program. However, the regional program provides any transportation that is needed for fieldtrips, outings, or transportation to the technical education program in a local high school with two vans.

The staff to student ratio for this small program can range from 1:1 to 1:4 (or 1 staff to 1.4 students on average). Table 2. provides information on current enrollment and staffing for this program, which also includes a program director. In addition to the special education teachers and educational technicians, the program includes a social worker on site and contracts for speech and language services as needed. Member districts may also supply their own specialists, such as an OT or PT specialist. A director of special services from one member district oversees the program along with a program director.

**Table 2. Western Maine Collaborative Enrollment and Staffing**

Students 2017-18	# Reg. Ed Teachers	# SPED Teachers	# Ed Techs	# Other Staff Specialists
10	--	2	5	1+

Enrollment reported by the collaborative as of March 2018.

Professional development for teachers and staff working on site in the program is scheduled during early release time on Wednesdays each week, and in morning staff meetings.

Staff training is also scheduled each summer prior to the start of the school year. Topics in the fall 2017 included safety, strategies to de-escalate student behaviors, and restorative justice. One reason for the significant time in staff training is related to the fact that this is the first year of the program, and first year for new staff hires to work together. Staff explained the need to take their time to build a common philosophy and approach within their program before growing larger. The program director commented, “It’s going to take time to kind of develop . . . for the culture of a new program, no matter what that new program is, for that culture to be ingrained takes time and patience.”

**Assignment and Coordination of Services for Students.** Students can be referred to this program by teachers or their IEP team. There is a formal application and documents related to the student’s testing information, etc. are included. The chief criteria for acceptance is that the program is a good fit for students and has the potential to help students. The director of the regional program makes the final decision about acceptance of new students. Teachers and staff in the program coordinate with the student’s school IEP team on the services provided to the student and progress made. Similarly, program staff indicated they would work with the sending school and IEP team when it is time for a student to transition back to their home school. The program communicates with parents through the IEP process, parent/ teacher conferences, open houses, social media, and other communications.

**Membership and Governance.** District leaders indicated that while this new collaborative is relatively small with only three member districts, they are open to having additional school districts join their program, and other districts may send students to the program. The governance structure currently has three levels:

1. **Board of Directors:** This group includes one school board member from each of the three collaborating school districts. The group meets quarterly and approves proposals. Voting is weighted based on the population of each member municipality.
2. **Executive Officer Board:** This group includes the superintendents from the three member districts, and meets quarterly or as needed. The Executive Board oversees the work of the Executive Director of the regional program.
3. **Advisory Board:** This group includes the Directors of Special Services from the three member districts. The group meets monthly and plans the meeting agendas. Proposals

can come from any level of governance, typically move upward from the Advisory Board to the Executive Officer Board , and then to the Board of Directors for final approval.

### **Cost Considerations for Regional Services**

School districts that send students out of district or participate in a regional collaborative for special education services pay tuition/ administrative fees for each student and may incur additional expenses for services provided by specialists such as OT, PT, speech, nursing, or counseling services. Members of a collaborative may have a lower daily tuition rate than non-member districts that use a regional program. In addition to the tuition/ administrative fees, districts are responsible for any transportation costs to send their students to out of district placements.

The daily rates for participating students were somewhat different in the two regional collaboratives we studied. For both programs, the cost of administration and programs is based on the actual cost and is shared among the members of the collaborative. Thus, the larger number of districts participating and the higher student enrollment in the SPRPCE program allows for a lower daily rate than in the smaller Western Maine program. As the Western Maine Collaborative grows, the cost per student should decline.

In the SPRPCE collaborative, member districts pay an administrative fee once a year that is based on the total resident district enrollment, so larger districts would share more of the cost proportionately. That fee provides access to the programs and leadership team services of that collaborative, and participation on the governing boards. Non-member districts that utilize the programs pay both an administrative fee of \$2,400 and tuition, and do not participate on the governing boards. Member districts are also billed for tuition on a monthly basis, based on the number of students participating from a sending district in the SPRPCE programs. The cost for the Day Treatment Program is currently \$208 per student per day (or \$36,400 for the school year based on 175 student attendance days). The cost for the Multiple Handicapped Program is necessarily higher, given the more severe disabilities of students and the need for more one to one support. That program cost is currently \$238 per student per day (\$41,650 for the school year). The per pupil daily rate for the Innovation School (not a special education program but one of the programs offered by the SPRPCE collaborative), is currently \$108 (\$18,900 for the

school year). Program administrators indicated that the SPRPCE's daily rates for special services were similar to rates assessed by the Portland school district but lower than in Ellsworth.

For the newer and much smaller Western Maine Collaborative, the three member districts share the total costs for the program with no difference by district size. Member districts pay one all-inclusive fee which includes tuition. The current cost for member districts is \$257 per student per day, (or \$44,975 per student for the school year based on 175 student days). It should be noted that the program does not currently include students with multiple and severe disabilities which would require more one to one and nursing supports. While the collaborative does not yet have any non-member districts using the program, they have had several inquiries. Non-member districts would pay about \$28 more per day per student, or \$285 per student per day (\$49,875 per student for the school year). The cost per student will decline as the program grows in enrollment. Districts are billed on a daily basis rather than monthly.

While administrators were familiar with the basic costs for the services their students utilize in various programs, including the regional collaboratives, they were less certain of the exact level of fiscal savings from participation in a collaborative program. The administrators we interviewed from the SPRPCE collaborative felt certain that they saved several thousands of dollars in tuition costs by utilizing the regional program, which allows member districts to pool their resources and share the expense of hiring specialized staff. One program administrator estimated that member districts are saving from \$7,000 to \$10,000 per student by being in a collaborative. Depending on the severity of the student's disabilities, the savings can be much higher. For example, a student can be served by the Multiple Handicapped Program in the regional program which has an annual cost of just under \$42,000, which is substantially less than the cost to serve the same student in the sending school where teaching staff might cost \$75,000 and additional support staff would increase the total cost. Administrators did not see uniform savings in transportation as a result of participating in the SPRPCE collaborative. Administrators in the Western Regional Collaborative indicated that the program was not yet large enough to see a cost savings in the tuition. However, some districts did see a savings in transportation, while others did not. For the district hosting the program, the estimated transportation savings was about \$11,000 per student for the school year.

One major issue that surfaced in the interviews was the cost of placing students in out of district programs for special services and the billing of services for students who are covered by MaineCare health insurance. Districts pay a basic tuition cost for students sent to private programs. However, extra expenses are incurred if a student requires additional and more specialized services, such as PT, OT, medical support, or self-care training provided by a Behavior Health Professional. Some private agencies bill MaineCare for additional special services to students, while other programs simply pass this cost back to the sending district. When MaineCare is billed for services provided to a student, the Maine DHHS seeks reimbursement for approximately two-thirds of the cost from the federal government and the remaining one third of the cost from the state's SEED program, which comes out of a district's education subsidy from the state. One challenge for districts is to anticipate what the SEED costs will be and how much their budgets will be reduced. Another challenge is monitoring and verifying the accuracy of the numerous SEED charges to a district's budget. One district indicated their SEED adjustment for students in out of district placements totaled over \$185,000 in FY17, which reduced their state subsidy by 1.04%. It is important to point out that, while districts may bear these costs, or pass them on to the state program, there is federal funding through IDEA that could be utilized to pick up some of the costs for special services. It would require districts to bill for those costs, but would reduce the burden to Maine taxpayers.

Another related issue is the potential for private programs to charge more for services than public school programs, which drives up the cost to districts that cannot accommodate students in a public school program. To illustrate, private programs bill about \$60 per day for a student to receive additional special services above the basic tuition, while the cost for an educational technician's salary may be as low as \$14 per hour plus health benefits. By contrast, the regional public programs we studied do not charge for services through MaineCare but rather bill member districts using an all-inclusive fee based on actual costs. One director of special services explained,

When I look at my budget and I think about the money spent, between transportation and the actual tuition and the MaineCare fees and the traveling expenses for myself and anybody else that needs to go to the schools, it's a phenomenal amount of money. . . . I mean, we're not a for-profit service here. The agencies and the programs we send a lot of our kids to, they are for profit schools.

## Perceptions regarding Benefits of a Regional Approach

While neither of the two programs in this study had conducted a formal evaluation of impacts or cost-benefit analysis, both staff and district leaders shared their perceptions about the benefits and challenges of a regional approach for special education services. Broadly speaking, they saw several important areas where districts and students benefited and felt the positive aspects of a regional program outweighed the few potential negative aspects or challenges.

The most important benefit emphasized by staff and administrators we interviewed in the two regional programs focused on the **improved student access to specialized services** that fit their individual needs and IEPs. These might include behavioral supports and management, training for improvement of social skills, counseling, nursing care, PT, OT, or speech therapies. Districts that join a regional program have priority in securing a placement over other non-member districts. A director of special services commented, “I think, first and foremost, that students are receiving an appropriate educational program, determined to be in the least restrictive [environment], so we’re able to keep them close to home.” A superintendent noted that his/her district was too small to support some kinds of special services.

One of our neighboring districts, because of their student population, they have staffing to be able to offer day treatment programs in each of their elementary schools, whereas we do not have the capacity to do that, because we just don’t have the staffing for it. The same superintendent also noted the problem of finding appropriate placements for students who are expelled by their school. When a secondary student has an IEP, the district must find a placement that will support the student in earning a diploma. Private programs can sometimes reject or expel a student, which necessitates finding an alternative placement.

Another important benefit mentioned in the interviews with the two programs was the highly favorable **staff to student ratios** in the regional program, which provided a very high level of adult to student support. Administrators expressed the view that these programs could offer a more student-centered educational approach, in comparison with placement in an environment with a significantly larger class size. A program administrator in one collaborative commented,

These programs allow educators to hone in on the student’s needs and provide a special environment. . . . It’s very student-centered. I think that’s the biggest piece. Even though

we're working with several districts, the student is still at the center. And that's important.

The same administrator further explained,

All of the staff working in the classroom are all on the same page . . . they have to understand the behavior plan inside and out. They have to understand the trigger to the behavior and be able to see it quick enough to get to the behavior and provide a coping strategy prior to an escalation for a student. That's easier to do when you have lots of adults and a small number of children.

The two regional programs in these case studies also stressed the advantage of more **specialized training and expertise** of staff working with students. Staff members are trained in strategies to de-escalate student behavior problems and to ensure safety for students and adults. A SPRPCE program administrator noted that in addition to basic special services, the program also offers students training in social skill development and counseling services on site. She commented, "We have social skills groups, so we're working on social skills within the classroom setting. And then teachers carry those skills throughout the day for students. So they learn how to better interact with their peers." A director of special services noted that it is harder for smaller schools and districts to attract applicants for specialists in special education, and that is an advantage of having a collaborative program.

We're a fairly small district, so we have a few students that have a need for a day program . . . feasibly, it doesn't make sense, it doesn't work, number-wise, in my district. . . . The students got to a level of requiring more services than what we could manage . . . and we just lacked the expertise. In the Multiple Handicapped Program, the staff that work in that program have a different level of expertise and training. And we don't have that same pool of candidates.

A staff member in one regional program noted that a student who had been restrained 38 times within a trimester in a former placement had not needed physical restraint since coming to the regional program. The combination of more one to one supervision and staff training contributed to this success. The staff member explained, "If students are feeling safe, then they're not needing that. If you're safe, you're not going to do unsafe behaviors that require you to be restrained."

In the interviews, administrators from both regional programs shared their sense of satisfaction with the governance structure of the regional collaboratives, and their feeling that all member districts have **significant input into decisions** about the programs offered. One director of special services explained: “I think we have a lot of say and a lot of input. I know that there are a lot of conversations among superintendents. Our superintendent is certainly very involved in those conversations . . .” A director of special services from another district said,

I feel like there’s a lot of communication. . . . I think it’s nice to have as much input into the programming and have a real inside view of what happens in that program. . . . I just feel like we have a lot of say in how that functions.

A superintendent described how the level of input was a significant improvement from the experience using private programs.

We have a lot of say, in terms of staffing, in terms of program decisions, and in terms of oversight. . . . Our special education director works very closely with the other two directors who are involved in the program, so I would say that is a definite bonus, in terms of how that operates. Whereas, any of the other programs [we use] we have no voice in terms of any decisions on curriculum or staffing or any other decisions.

Administrators from other member districts agreed that communication about the regional programs was good and that their districts had significant input on decisions for programming in the regional program.

In both of the regional programs we studied, staff and administrators appreciated the benefit of **servicing students within the public school system** and local district as an important benefit of a district collaborative. This was viewed as a benefit as it reduced the higher costs of tuition to private programs, reduced the longer bus rides to some private programs, and made it easier for students to participate in afterschool activities in their own district or sending school. One program director shared the view that student participation in extra-curricular activities, such as sports or the high school tech program, helps to keep students connected to their school and community. “They feel like they are part of this district, part of this community, and not purposefully cordoned off from the community.”

Another important benefit emphasized by both regional programs was the ability to obtain **significant cost efficiencies** by joining a regional collaborative. A superintendent shared,



“The biggest advantage is increased quality for reduced cost.” The same superintendent also described more broadly what has worked well with the regional collaborative approach.

The willingness of the superintendents to work together for the needs of the students is the greatest factor in making this work, along with the fact that every district has skin in the game. We all pay the same tuition. We all know the rule of “you pay for what you use.”

A director of special services from a member district shared the view that districts are reducing costs by being part of a collaborative.

In terms of some of the students that we’ve placed there, and some of their needs, and how they’ve been met with pretty significant services in place, that would certainly cost a bit more if we had to provide services for them in our schools.

A superintendent said, “Because we belong to SPRPCE, we are better able to provide the appropriate planning and programming for students that would benefit from it. We would not be able to fiscally support the programming in an individual school setting.” When the Bangor school district took on the coordination of SPRPCE they adopted a leadership team structure instead of using an executive director position and saved about half the salary expense. Several administrators in the district help to coordinate and oversee the SPRPCE programs. The collaborative also saved on insurance and photocopier expenses.

Because the Western Maine Collaborative is still in its first year and enrollment is very small, their costs for student tuition are somewhat higher. At least one member district described lower tuition costs than the district would have had for out of district placements, while another member district felt tuition costs were roughly equivalent to out of district costs. However, districts emphasized that they had obtained more substantial savings in transportation costs, particularly for the larger district where the program is located. They expect tuition costs to decline as the program grows with more students. A superintendent said,

The collaborative program came about as the result of the first round of educational efficiencies grants that the state put out there, and three districts got together around the idea that there was probably a cheaper way to meet the needs, rather than relying on out of district placements. So we developed that program and there are cost savings in terms of what we pay for tuition. It’s certainly to our benefit. If we were to place more

students, it would reduce our costs even more. . . . Because this is the first year that the program has started, we've not placed anywhere near the number of students that program would be capable of absorbing.

The benefit of **reduced time on the bus** to and from programs for many participating students was an important benefit according to staff and administrators. One staff member noted the benefit that serving students closer to home not only decreases transportation time, but allows students to get more sleep, which improves their behavior and educational performance. Generally, member districts were neighboring communities to the district hosting the program. However, administrators did acknowledge the potential for a longer bus ride for some students, depending on where the alternative private program might be located. For larger collaboratives such as SPRPCE, or collaboratives set in rural areas like the Western Collaborative, there is the potential for somewhat longer bus rides for some students.

Administrators described how students spending a long time traveling to private programs often missed out on after school activities in their home district. Attending a regional program located in a student's own district, or neighboring district, can make it easier for students to participate in their district's sports and extra-curricular programs and feel more a part of that school community. A program director for the Western Maine Collaborative explained, "If they want to be on a sports team and they make eligibility, then they can be, we can get them to games and practices."

A benefit for students, mentioned in the interviews, was the **opportunity for students to be in a peer group** with other students who have similar disabilities within a regional program. One director of special services from a member district gave the example of a deaf student who was able to learn sign language with other deaf students attending the regional program. Had the student stayed in the sending school, there may not have been any other deaf students. A superintendent from the same member district agreed, noting that students can have more social opportunities in a regional program. The superintendent commented,

I think about some of the very unique situations we have and how those students have gained so much socially, and being out in the community, working with those groups, because of their placement in out of district programs, that we wouldn't have been able to provide to the same quality here [within district].

Administrators from another collaborative agreed on the social, emotional benefits of having students engage with their peers, both peers with disabilities in the regional program as well as peers in the broader, regular education program.

Staff and administrators also shared the view that a regional collaborative provides new opportunities to **share professional development** for special education teachers and other staff, and that this training is provided at a very low per person cost for the districts who are members of the collaborative. A program administrator commented,

I think that's one of the joys of SPRPCE. Not only do we allow regional programming for students, but also professional development. It allows us to offer a monthly professional development opportunity. And, last year, the most that anybody was charged was five dollars.

A director of special services from a member district agreed that shared professional development in special education was a benefit of the collaborative and said, "We have many employees who take advantage of those opportunities."

Finally, an important benefit that was mentioned by staff and administrators in the SPRPCE collaborative was the ability to **share ideas** about working with students with special needs among the professionals from other member districts. A program administrator discussed the positive aspect of professional collaboration:

I think the collaboration, the collaboration amongst districts, because we can all learn from one another and that's what we're doing on a regular basis. If I think about the professional development, that's one way to collaborate. But also, working with all of the area special education directors, and their teams. Placing a student here, we may talk about what's worked well, and what hasn't worked.

A director of special services from a member district said: "You're able to share not only resources, but you're sharing expertise. You can learn a lot from each other when you're in a collaborative group." A superintendent of a member district commented,

Keeping that more regional conversation going . . . we learn from each other. And to be able to have access to people who are really experts in their field, dealing with very complex educational and medical issues, that makes all of us better.

## Perceptions of Potential Challenges with a Regional Approach

While staff and administrators described a wide range of benefits from being part of a regional collaborative that provides special education services to students, they also mentioned a few challenges. Consistently, people viewed transportation of special education students as the biggest challenge for these and other districts. Part of the challenge was the **time some students spent being transported** to services outside their district. In the Western Maine Collaborative, some students might spend 45 to 60 minutes traveling to the regional program. Even so, this can be a shorter travel time than for students to attend more distant private programs.

Another challenge related to transportation was the **cost for transportation**, which could be higher for districts further from the regional program location. A director of special services from a member district shared this view:

I think that's a challenge for lots of places all over the state. It's just not an easy thing. We've explored different ways to do that. We have our own fleet of vans in our district, because we have to get kids to counseling services and those types of things. I'm not really sure that there's a solution.

A superintendent from the same district said, "It can be challenging, because we have four kiddos in three different programs. So how do we get them where they need to be on the schedules that they have established?" This superintendent indicated that another neighboring district had suggested that the two districts share transportation for the students they are sending to the regional program, and they will continue to investigate this opportunity. A superintendent from another regional program said that even though the tuition costs were somewhat less in the regional collaborative, the district was still incurring high transportation costs.

In terms of one of the drawbacks of the program, or any program really, is when you look at transportation costs. . . . you just can't avoid exorbitant transportation costs, even though the tuition costs, relative to other programs, is fairly low. I think it's ultimately a function of geographical isolation.

This superintendent noted there was a school system much closer to the district located in New Hampshire, but the per pupil cost to tuition students to that out of state district would be prohibitive. A director of special services agreed, "The biggest barrier for us is our location and transportation to any program placement."

A third challenge related to transportation was the task of **coordinating daily school schedules for transportation** to and from a regional program. A director of special services from one member district located about 20 miles from a regional program acknowledged the challenge of coordinating transportation for students. “The one thing that’s a bit more challenging for us, at times, is transportation, because we’re one of the districts that’s a little bit further away. Sometimes coordinating transportation can be a challenge.” A superintendent from a member district shared,

Some of our challenges are calendars, because our calendar isn’t necessarily the same as the regional program’s calendar all of the time. If we cancel school on a snow day, what happens if they don’t? . . . Some of those kinds of logistics become challenges. But, they’re not challenges that we can’t overcome.

**Financing special services** for students with the most severe disabilities can be expensive for districts, no matter whether students receive services within district or outside the district. Typically, the cost is higher outside the district, but could be lower for districts choosing to join a collaborative. However, it depends on what a district is able to budget for special services, how many students need special services, and what kinds of services are needed. This can change dramatically from year to year. A superintendent from one member district described the challenge of trying to anticipate the budget needs for future years given many uncertainties and changing variables.

Budgeting in and of itself is a challenge, because you never know. The population that you have in front of you one year isn’t the population that you necessarily will have the next year, for which you budgeted. . . . I’ve looked at that budget line annually. I’ve looked at the movement in the line, in terms of, are the students that were previously placed in those out of district placements still in those placements? Have students returned to their regular school setting? Or have we replaced those students with different students? All of those pieces. Then I look at that line, see what our trends in spending have been, and then usually increase that by one to three percent, depending on the data that’s in front of me.

A director of special services from another member district indicated that the district typically budgets for one additional special education student each year. “I try to anticipate a need,

looking ahead. I usually budget for one additional spot. I take what I know I need and then I will add one.”

Administrators mentioned the challenge of **public perception or awareness**, in that some parents, teachers, and principals may not fully be aware of the services and opportunities available through regional programs. A director of special services explained, “I think it’s very misunderstood. I don’t think parents, in general, or teachers have a great understanding of what the regional programs are really about.” The director noted that her administrative team has toured the regional program, but she suggested “I think it would be great if all teachers could tour the program.” A superintendent from the same district shared the view that principals are so busy with many building-level responsibilities, that once a student is placed out of district, principals shift their attention to other pressing matters. To improve principals’ awareness about the benefits of services provided by regional programs and how schools need to work to maintain the gains students make in those programs, the superintendent organized a tour of regional programs for principals. The superintendent explained,

You need to know where they’re coming from, and what their experiences were that worked there, so that you can support that student when they return. There’s those kinds of conversations that have to be kept in front of them [principals] all of the time. Again, I think it’s because their attention is on their local school unit, and what they’re doing every day within their walls, and not necessarily thinking how that kiddo is doing that’s now attending school in another place.

At least one administrator shared the view that school board members may be more aware of the benefits of regional programs, as member districts have a school board member on the regional program board. But school board members may also be unaware of the actual cost savings for sending students to a regional program, according to one superintendent of a member district.

**Transitioning a student back to the sending school** can be a challenge as well. Both the regional program and the sending school work closely to coordinate this process with teachers and the family. A director of special services from a member district acknowledged that the regional program’s smaller class sizes help students be successful, and this can be more challenging when the student returns to a larger class size in the sending school.

. . . we have higher ratios in terms of numbers of students to staff. I think that sometimes, that transition feels like we can't replicate what they're doing in the day treatment program. I think that there's a lot of dialogue that has to be done around what this looks like here. What would that look like in a different setting? How could we incorporate a similar strategy?

Finally, while regional collaborative programs may alleviate some of the challenges districts face in providing appropriate services to students at an affordable cost, it **may not be the answer for all students needing special services**. Districts routinely investigate multiple programs, public and private, to find the best fit for each individual student whose needs cannot be met within the student's local school. Depending on what services are offered or not offered by a regional program, districts may need to find alternative program placements for students. Further, the administrators we interviewed acknowledged that parents sometimes prefer a private program, which often has a higher cost. A director of special services from one member district said,

We have sent students to other special purpose private schools. But in terms of regional programs, we only belong to one regional program. We had one instance where it was a situation where the regional program didn't work in the parents' eyes. We tried something else, and that kind of worked out a little bit better. If the regional program just seems to not work for a kid, we may try a different day treatment setting.

Districts indicated that decisions about placements are handled on a case by case basis, with involvement of the IEP team, parents, administrators, and the student.

### **Thoughts for Other Districts Considering Regional Collaboration**

The two regional programs we investigated in this study were quite different in terms of their district membership size, student enrollment, range of regional programs and services, and experience operating a collaborative program. The large SPRPCE collaborative has been operating now for nearly 40 years, while the smaller Western Maine Collaborative is just in the first year of implementation. Yet, surprisingly, administrators and member districts had similar cautions and advice for other districts in Maine seeking to pursue.

Both collaboratives emphasized the **importance of having a governance structure in place**, and a leadership team. A program administrator said, "I think that's probably a big piece.

If you don't have that in place, you've got to start there before you can move forward with anything." A superintendent shared, "The governance structure works extremely well. However, it works best when a superintendent takes the lead, rather than an outside executive director. Superintendents know the law, the finances, and the educational aspects of the regional programs." The governance structure, scope of the program, fee structure, and other policies were outlined in the interlocal agreements among member districts. The governing boards provided oversight for the budget, personnel hiring, decisions about program content, operations, and policies, and this organizational structure was a necessary foundation needed prior to program operation.

Staff and district administrators also stressed it is **important to "take it slow"** and allow sufficient time to develop and implement a regional program. For example, one superintendent said it was important to take time to make sure all member districts fully understand the terms of the interlocal agreement and agree to the overall governance structure. Other staff and directors of special services indicated it was important not to grow or expand too quickly. Part of the reason for this caution was the challenge in recruiting and hiring fully certified special education staff and specialists for the program, and the need to train new staff. Another reason for expanding the program slowly related to the desire to develop the desired school culture and effective practices and working relationships among staff. A director of one regional program cautioned, "I think that my advice for a new regional program is to take the time to establish that culture, and not just create a place to hold all those kids."

Districts thinking about developing a regional program may find it **beneficial to visit and talk with staff and administrators of existing regional collaboratives**. The Western Maine Collaborative based their structure on the successful and well-established SPRPCE collaborative, but made some minor changes in their own structure and programs to fit their local needs. Staff and administrators across both regional collaboratives agreed about the benefit of sharing information among professionals regionally and learning from each other to improve local programs and services to students.

Superintendents and directors of special services whom we interviewed acknowledged that the prospect of sending students out of district for special services can cause anxieties for parents and for students. They recommended **improving information to parents as well as**



**regular and special education teachers, principals, and school board members to increase awareness** about the kinds of supports regional programs can offer and how they may help students to be more successful. Visits to these programs is one strategy that districts found very helpful in building awareness and easing concerns of parents to help smooth the transition for the student. A director of special services from a member district shared these thoughts and advice:

I think it is scary for families, initially, to know that the student's not going to be in their local school. I think that's scary for most families, and they have the fear of the unknown. And feeling like they've maybe lost a little bit of control. But I think with some coordinated effort, and some education and careful planning, you can relieve some of that stress and pressure by doing the tours, by giving the parents the information, and by having staff continue to be a part of that student's life while they're in that regional program . . . I think once students get there, I think we work with the family and they see the benefit of the program. I think that alleviates some of the stress and worry. I think on the flip side of that. . . . sometimes it's a relief to families to know that there's a program, that is, they have trained staff, and they have the right facility and the right teaching tools . . . and it's close by.

Finally, the challenge of **coordinating transportation** for students who attend an out of district program, such as a regional program, is one that needs constant discussion and cooperation among districts utilizing a program. The districts interviewed for this study indicated that regional programs may need to align their school schedules. Sending districts may need to share transportation with other sending districts. Transportation costs could be less or could be more for different sending districts, depending on their proximity to the regional program and the range of special services students receive. A director of special services from a member district explained, "It does require a coordinated effort amongst all the players. Know that, for some folks, transportation may be more of a significant barrier. Getting kids to and from programs. That could incur an increased cost."

### **Thoughts about State Policy**

The interviews asked staff and administrators from participating school districts what they would like state policymakers to know about regional collaboratives. Members of both collaboratives viewed the regional approach for special services as largely positive and beneficial

for both districts and for students. They indicated their support for state efforts to create an incentive program, such as the EMBRACE grant program, to **encourage and support the development of new regional programs**. The funding provided by such programs can help districts overcome the barrier of initial start-up costs associated with preparing facilities, obtaining equipment, and creating new staff positions. In some of the interviews, participants indicated it may also be helpful for the state to continue some financial support for new programs past the first year. One regional program staff member said,

I would absolutely love to see the legislature continue to support, especially with this regionalization being a new thing, to not grow that too big, too fast, but to be able to provide support . . . mindful support to get these programs to be able to stabilize. . . . It's important opportunities for the legislature to continue to support and to explore and evaluate how it works as well, because it is new.

Regional programs like the SPRPCE collaborative that have been operating for several years were not eligible for the recent incentive programs. A superintendent urged policymakers to **"honor existing regional programs"** rather than expecting all programs, even well-established ones, to compete for incentives and expand. Some existing programs may benefit from state support to expand their regional services, but administrators indicated that each program is unique and a uniform incentive program may not fit all regional needs.

The idea that **each region must determine its own needs** and develop programs that fit those circumstances was reiterated across the interviews. A director of one regional program said,

If it makes sense to regionalize within the area that you have, then I think it's a really good thing. I don't think forced regionalization is necessarily a good thing, because sometimes that process it too far and it really doesn't end up being efficient.

A superintendent of a member district described how regional collaboratives may fit the needs of some districts in the state, but not all.

It can't be a silver bullet kind of thing that is a one-size-fits-all structure. Because, I think on a regional basis, it has to make sense for that region. Just because SPRPCE works well the way it does in our region doesn't mean that you're going to be able to replicate that in all the regions across the state.

The same superintendent also advocated for **flexibility in how regional programs are structured** and noted that they will evolve over time as the needs of member districts change. Several administrators noted the challenge of rising costs in special education and increased incidence of more complex learning needs of students.

As described earlier in the report, district leaders placed **a high value on being able to keep their students within their home schools and districts when possible, and within the public-school system**. This had the benefit of facilitating the student's involvement in school and community activities, and reducing the time spent in transportation. This goal came through in the documents that described the reasons these districts established the two collaborative programs, as well as in the interviews. While district leaders did not specifically discuss state policies that either support or hinder the goal of keeping students in their home schools, it was clear that they prioritize being able to serve students locally and only send students to other placements when they feel the student's needs would be better supported in another program. For example, a director of special services explained, "We try to put lots of supports in place in the regular school setting, before we're looking at a change in placement." Despite this goal, leaders from smaller districts also described the challenge of not having sufficient staffing resources to accommodate some of the unique needs students have. One superintendent commented, "It becomes challenging just because of our student count. We don't really have critical mass, in terms of staffing, to use them in ways beyond the way we are."

The **challenge of meeting federal and state special education law and requirements** for services to students did not come up in most interviews and was not a specific focus of this study. However, a director of special services commented,

I think in special education there are lots of regulations, and we tend to get really bogged down in regulations, and we can kind of lose focus sometimes, in terms of doing what's best for kids, because we're so worried about meeting expectations, meeting regulations. Certainly, compliance with regulations is a major consideration when making decisions about placement of students and appropriate services. It may be that for regional programs with more specialized staff, students could experience a less restrictive environment in their education. According to staff and administrators, that change can provide a real benefit to students. It is not

clear if there is a need to provide more flexibility to school districts in serving students. Further study would be needed to answer that question.

A recurring theme in the interviews and one that has been much discussed state wide is the **crisis of supplying the specialized staff** needed to serve the rising numbers of students with more complex learning needs. Staff and administrators specifically noted the difficulty of finding certified special education staff, given the documented shortages in this area and the fierce competition among districts (and states) to attract candidates. The two regional programs we studied have been able to hire certified teachers and educational technicians, but sometimes struggle to fill all the open positions in the other schools in their districts. A director of special services said,

This year is the first year that I haven't been able to hire all of my special ed teachers. I have a vacancy right now in my district, and there is no one that I can hire for that. And even now, we're running out of ed tech III candidates in this area.

Another administrator described how some private programs are forced to rely on long-term substitutes to fill out staffing needs. For small schools in rural areas, it can be especially challenging to recruit and retain special education staff. Another director of special services shared,

Policymakers should know how difficult it is to hire special education staff, either a special education teacher or related service provider or an educational technician. . . . I do think they need to know that that has been a troubled area, especially in rural Maine, about getting qualified staff, qualified teachers.

A superintendent from a member district mentioned the frustration of having to wait on a placement because staff in a regional program may be waiting to receive certification from the MDOE.

Related to the challenge of filling vacant special education positions, some administrators we interviewed felt that **additional incentives are needed to encourage more people to pursue careers in special education**. One director of special services said,

I know there are some incentives, for people who come back and teach in rural areas. . . . But I think one thing that's difficult for all of us . . . is we have a really strong shortage of special ed teachers right now in the state. . . . the legislature really needs to look at how are we going to

keep people in special education and working with these really high needs students. Which also links to poverty and domestic violence and trauma.

Another director of special services from a member district commented on the relatively modest salaries for educators and the large debts they sometimes incur for pursuing preparation programs. A third director of special services in a member district explained,

I think there are fewer and fewer young adults going into the field of education in general, whether that's regular ed or special education. I think that part of that is the pay scale, for teaching staff. It's not a profession that people are going to want to accrue a debt of \$150,000 to \$200,000 to get their degree and then make \$30,000 a year.

Finally, the **high and ever-increasing cost of delivering special education services** was foremost on the minds of the superintendents and directors of special services whom we interviewed. These costs can be especially high when a district incurs tuition and transportation costs to send a student to an out of district placement in a private program. This is an area where districts would like more financial help from the state. One superintendent from a small district that utilizes both a regional collaborative and private programs described how sending a few students out of district has a big impact on the overall district budget (for this district, spending roughly \$800,000 out of a budget of \$19 million to place ten students). The superintendent suggested,

I would like to see some analysis of what districts are spending on out of district placements, and somehow have that accounted for. . . . when I look at ten percent increases year after year in special education, it becomes harder to cobble together the total budget. And so just some acknowledgement and funding that deals with those transportation costs and out of district placement costs would be really helpful.

A director of special services from the same small district offered this suggestion for policymakers:

I think they need to seriously think about how much a town can actually continue to pay to support the high needs of some of these students . . . and when you're geographically challenged, like many of us are in the state of Maine, it makes it even more financially burdensome.

## Conclusions and Implications for Policy

This study investigated the use of a regional approach for delivering special education programs and services to students in Maine. Across the state, this approach appears to be in the early stages of emergence, with the exception of the well-established SPRPCE collaborative. About seven regional programs are currently operational across different regions of Maine, with more awaiting approval or in the discussion phase. These programs are generally quite small, serving a small number of students who cannot be served in their schools of residence. By contrast, the SPRPCE collaborative serves 19 SAUs in central Maine and is growing. Two regional programs were examined through case studies for this report. Both formed out of the desire of school districts to keep students in the public-school system and to increase fiscal efficiencies in special education.

Our interviews with program coordinators and district leaders confirmed earlier findings in the research that there are many kinds of potential benefit for districts and students through a regional, collaborative approach for special services. District leaders valued being able to keep students within the public-school system and serving them closer to home, rather than placing them in private programs. Some districts did obtain significant cost savings for either tuition or transportation or both when they pooled resources and served students in a public program rather than in private programs. District leaders felt they had more input and control over decisions about the programs, and they appreciated the opportunity to share professional development and ideas about successful strategies to support students with challenging learning needs. Students were able to access more specialized support services with a more favorable staff to student ratio. For some member districts, students benefited by having shorter bus rides and more time to participate in their home school sports and activities. Students could also benefit by being in peer groups that shared a particular disability.

The biggest challenge described in the interviews centered around the transportation of students to out of district programs, whether for regional programs or private programs. The cost of transportation, logistics for coordinating transportation with school schedules, and the time that students spend riding to and from programs were all issues that administrators are struggling with. Another challenge districts were seeking to overcome was the lack of awareness about regional programs among practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders. Some district leaders

made a concerted effort to organize tours of the regional program to improve understanding and perceptions for using a regional program.

Administrators shared suggestions for other districts contemplating a regional approach for special education. The suggestions emphasized the need to take time to develop the governance structure and get all district members on-board. One of the regional programs we studied has an executive director for the regional program, while the other collaborative uses a leadership team structure. Sharing information within the collaborative was viewed as critical, as well as more broadly informing the larger community about the services available within the regional program.

The implications for state policy were also explored through the interviews. Administrators were highly supportive of the concept of regionalizing educational services. They applauded the state's incentive program for developing new regional programs for special education, and they hoped support would continue for expanding existing programs as well. At the same time, administrators voiced the hope that the state would honor and recognize the successes of existing programs. The goal of keeping students in their home district when possible, or at least in the public-school system, came through in the interviews. Program staff and administrators indicated the need for the state to study and evaluate the results of regional programs for special education to better understand how this approach impacts district costs and benefits students. Information about effective models for regionalization could be shared more broadly with districts across the state. At the same time, district leaders cautioned that a regional program may not be the answer for every region in the state, and that the state should allow flexibility for districts to determine what type of structure and programs best meet their students' needs and district resources. District leaders voiced the strong preference for keeping students in their schools if at all possible, and only sending them out to regional or other programs if they cannot be served in their own schools.

Two overriding challenges have implications for state policy: 1) the high cost for special education programs and transportation, and 2) the short supply in qualified and certified special education teachers and specialists. Two overriding challenges have implications for state policy: 1) the high cost for special education programs and transportation, and 2) the short supply in qualified and certified special education teachers and specialists. The complex and challenging

problems related to financing the cost of special education (particularly given the range of special services needed for students with more severe disabilities and the cost of transportation of students to out of district placements) are felt nationally and cannot be easily or quickly resolved. Regional collaboration among districts has the potential to reduce some of the costs for districts, but is not a guaranteed outcome. Moreover, financial savings is not the only objective for using a regional approach. Increasing capacity to serve students closer to home is also a goal. Providing the most appropriate support in the least restrictive environment is another important goal. The legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches recommended that state and federal funding formulas for special education be revisited to increase equity across school districts and to address rising costs (Maine State Legislature, 2018).

In addition to the challenge of high costs for special education, the short supply of qualified and certified personnel to provide services to students is an additional barrier to building this capacity. Incentives, higher salaries, dual-certification programs (e.g., providing certification in elementary and special education together), and other strategies to encourage individuals to pursue careers in special education may eventually improve the supply of teachers and specialists in special education. Multiple and creative strategies will be needed to examine and address these issues in a comprehensive way. The legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services recommended that the teacher shortage should be addressed by offering dual certification for general and special education.

A recent state statutory revision to take effect in July 2018 (Title 20-A MRSA Sec.15681) aims to incentivize districts to use regional public programs for special education services over private programs with the goal of lowering costs. However, the same legislation also creates a perhaps unintended disincentive for districts to keep students in their home schools, because the state reimbursement of costs is triggered more easily for regional public program placements (triggered when the cost exceeds twice the Essential Programs and Services or EPS cost) than for services in a student's home school district (only triggered when the cost exceeds three times the EPS cost). MEPRI studies, including the current case studies, have documented that districts seek to serve students in their own schools when possible. The new statutory language will create tensions for districts that want to determine services based on



students' individual needs, rather than state subsidy rules. This situation may warrant further legislative review.

One option that has not been well explored in Maine is the idea of contracting with regional public programs for itinerant specialists as needed to serve students in their home schools. This could have the dual benefit of both keeping students in their own schools and local communities, while providing the necessary level of expertise, equipment, and services to support students appropriately in the less restrictive environment. Contracting for services as needed each year could help districts avoid the challenges and cost of trying to hire and retain permanent specialists. Districts could adjust services as the needs of students change each year. However, this approach again depends on having an adequate supply of qualified professionals.

Another policy option for consideration would be to encourage or require school districts to first seek ways to obtain the resources (staffing, equipment, etc.) needed to serve students in their home schools before they are placed in out of district placements, public or private. As described above, some resources could be obtained by collaborating with a neighboring district or contracting with a regional public program. Serving the growing numbers and more complex needs of Maine's special education students, within the context of a shortage in the supply of special education teachers and specialists, will require thinking outside the box and moving away from traditional ways of delivering services.

Finally, the potential to tap more federal funding through IDEA to offset the cost of special services for students should be explored and perhaps incentivized through state policy. When districts do not bill for all of the eligible services they have provided to students, the cost is instead borne by districts and the state as a whole. This is an area deserving more investigation, and was also a recommendation of the legislative Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches (Maine State Legislature, 2018).

## Bibliography

- Berry, C. (2007). School consolidation and inequality. In Loveless, Tom and Frederick Hess (Eds.), *Brookings Papers on Education Policy 2006/ 2007*. Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Berry, C. & West, M. (2010). Growing pains: The school consolidation movement and student outcomes. *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 26(1) 1-29.
- Cox, B. & Cox, B. (2010). A decade of results: A case for school district consolidation? *Education* 131(1) 83-92.
- Donis-Keller, C., O'Hara-Miklavic, B., & Fairman, J. (2013). Improving educational opportunity and equity through school district consolidation in Maine. *Maine Policy Review*. 22 (2) 42-54.
- Duncombe, W. & Yinger, J. (2010). School district consolidation: The benefits and costs. *The School Administrator* 67 (5).
- Fairman, J. & Donis-Keller, C. (2012). School district reorganization in Maine: Lessons learned for policy and process. *Maine Policy Review*. 21 (2) 24-40.
- Finnigan, S., Holme, J., Orfield, M., Luce, T., Diem, S., Matteis, A., Hylton, N. (2015). Regional educational policy analysis: Rochester, Omaha, and Minneapolis' inter-district arrangements. *Educational Policy*. 29(5) 780-814.
- Helge, D. (1984). *Problems and strategies regarding regionalizing service delivery: Educational collaboratives in rural America*. National Rural Research Project. Murray, KY: Murray State University.
- Hicks, M. and V. Rusalkina. (2004). *School consolidation and educational performance: An economic analysis of West Virginia high schools*. Center for Business and Economics, Marshall University, Huntington, WV.
- Lehr, C., Tan, C., Ysseldyke, J. (2009). Alternative schools: A synthesis of state-level policy and research. *Remedial and Special Education*. 30(1) 19-32.
- Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI). (2006). *A report on efforts to stimulate regional programs and services in special education in Maine*. Orono, ME: University of Maine.

Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI). (2006). *A report on efforts to stimulate regional programs and services in special education in Maine*. Orono, ME: University of Maine.

Maine State Legislature (2018). *Report of the Task Force to Identify Special Education Cost Drivers and Innovative Approaches to Services*. Augusta, ME: Maine State Legislature.

Ward, J. & Rink, F. (1992). Analysis of local stakeholder opposition to school district consolidation: An application of interpretive theory to public policy making. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 8(2) 11-19.

## Author Information

Janet C. Fairman is an Associate Professor in the College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine, and co-Director of MEPRI. Dr. Fairman holds a doctorate degree in education policy and has expertise in the areas of education policy analysis, program evaluation, and qualitative research methodology. Her research includes a focus on STEM education, innovative and reform practices in education, and teacher leadership.

Mary Ellen Seymour, co-investigator, is a doctoral student in Intervention and Prevention Studies in the College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine. Mary Ellen has experience as a special education teacher and is currently the Assistant Director of Special Education in RSU 22 in Maine.

## Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol for MDOE Director of Special Services

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for District Administrators of Regional Programs

Appendix C: Interview Protocol for District Administrators of Sending Districts

## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol for MDOE Director of Special Services

- Does the MDOE have data on the number and location of regional programs and services for SPED in the state, both public and private?
- How does the state collect that information? How accurate and up to date is this information?
- Overall, how many public programs are regional? How many are private in the state?
- Which types of services are delivered on a regional basis? (what does regional mean?)
- How long have districts been using a regional approach? Has this trend increased recently? Why or why not?
- What are some of the advantages of a regional approach?
- What are some of the disadvantages?
- What has been working well with the regional approach?
- What has not worked as well with the regional approach?
- What would you most like to learn about districts' experience with a regional approach for special education from the MEPRI study?
- Is there anyone else we should talk with?

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol for District Administrators of Regional Programs

#### Current Services:

- Please describe what special education programs or services your district currently delivers on a regional basis.
- Does your program provide intervention or follow up services?
- Does the district use a regional approach for professional development of SPED teachers or other aspects of the SPED program?

#### Program History:

- When did the district first begin to deliver these services on a regional basis?
- What were the primary reasons for the decision to use a regional approach for these services?
- Did the district solicit input from stakeholder groups on this decision?

#### Governance and Communication:

- What is the governance structure for the regional SPED program?
- How are decisions made about which students will be accepted into your program?
- How does your district share information with sending districts?

#### Reflection on Program:

- To what extent could your regional program be expanded? What are the constraints if any?
- What has worked well with the regional approach? Please be specific.
- What has not worked as well?
- Has the district collected any data to evaluate the success of the regional approach?
- To what extent had the regional approach produced a cost savings or increased revenue for your district?
- What advice would you give other districts thinking about shifting to a regional approach?
- What do you want state policymakers to know about the pros and cons of a regional approach for special education programs and services?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol for District Administrators of Sending Districts

- Please describe the programs and types of services available to your students through a regional provision of special education services.
  - How are program costs calculated?
  - What is the typical annual cost per student for specific programs?
  - Are you required to pay additional fees for support staff (i.e. 1:1 support staff), social work services, transportation, language/occupational/physical therapy, counseling services, etc.?
  
- If your district has access to more than one regionalized program to provide services for your students, how do you make decisions about which program to choose for individual students?
  
- How many of your district's students are currently placed in out-of-district programs?
  
- Does your budget allow for a certain number of placements in out-of-district programs during each school year? (Do you budget for a certain number of placements or a dollar amount above the current number of students who participate in regionalized programming?)
  
- How are decisions about when/why to place a student in an out-of-district placement made? Who is involved in this decision?
  
- What is the process for having a student begin at an out-of-district placement?
  
- To what extent does your district have input or say in the programming that occurs in an out-of-district placement?
  
- Please describe the lines of communication between sending district and regional program?
  
- Is there a collaborative group that belongs to the regional program? If so, does belonging to the group reduce your costs associated with programming?

- Please describe the barriers to placing your students in regional programs.
- Please describe the benefits to placing your students in regional programs.
- Does your district participate in or receive any additional benefits from participating in a regionalized approach to providing special education services?
- How is the regional approach to providing services to students perceived by parents/guardians? Teachers?
- Has your district examined the possibility of developing your own district programs to provide services for your students or for providing services to other districts?
- What would you like state policymakers to know or understand about the benefits or drawbacks to participating in a regionalized program of providing special education services?