

October 2018
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Students Are the Focus as the Stillwater Area Public School District Redesigns How it Does School

Principals rode school buses, slid down playground slides and solved math equations with students. District-level directors ate lunch amidst the masses in noisy cafeterias. Even the superintendent of schools sat with kindergarteners, singing and signing songs in Spanish. It was just one part of a district-wide initiative underway in Stillwater Area Public Schools to redesign schools to better meet the needs of its students.

District leaders spent a day last spring shadowing students as a way to learn what it is really like to be a learner in Stillwater schools. It was part of the national Shadow a Student Challenge, which was started by the [Stanford University's d.school](#) as part of the design thinking process. It allowed leaders to observe the school experience through the eyes of the students, and then reflect on what they saw. It helped the people who make decisions on behalf of students every day stop and reflect on what those decisions look like for students, and become empathetic to their experiences.



Stillwater Superintendent Denise Pontrelli spent a day shadowing a student in a Spanish Immersion kindergarten classroom.

“Empathy is the heart of the work we’re doing to make our schools better for our kids,” said Bob McDowell, the district’s executive director of learning and innovation. “And it is at the center of the human-centered design process.”

Continued on page 2

October 5, 2018 Board of Directors Meeting

7 a.m.
Grand Hall,
TIES Conference Center
Saint Paul

October 26, 2018 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m.
Lexington Room,
TIES Conference Center
Saint Paul

November 2, 2018 Board of Directors Meeting

7 a.m.
Grand Hall,
TIES Conference Center
Saint Paul

November 16, 2018 Executive/Legislative Committee Meeting

7:30 a.m.
Lexington Room,
TIES Conference Center
Saint Paul

November 28, 2018 Save the Date! AMSD Annual Conference

TIES Conference Center
Saint Paul

AMSD’s Mission

To advocate for state education policy that enables metropolitan school districts to improve student learning.



Association of
Metropolitan School Districts

From the Chair

Minnesotans strongly favor bringing more stability to Minnesota’s education funding system. That was the clear message delivered by nationally respected public opinion pollster Dr. Bill Morris when he addressed AMSD board members in September. His latest polling results show that 64 percent of poll respondents support requiring the education funding formula to increase automatically by the rate of inflation annually. Likewise, 58 percent believe the State should pay the total cost of special education programming. When you think about the ballot choices on November 6, make sure you know where your candidates stand on these and other issues that impact teaching and learning. Critical education funding decisions will be made in the upcoming legislative session by those we elect in November. It is our obligation to make sure that each student has access to a high quality education. We encourage AMSD members to help inform our communities and candidates. The [AMSD Education Issues Election Guide](#) is an important resource that will help you frame the issues as you engage with candidates.

Stephanie Levine, school board member from West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan, is chair of AMSD.

Human-Centered Design Helping Stillwater Schools Rethink What School Can Be

Continued from page 1

The district has adopted human-centered design as a framework, and is using the process on everything from strategic planning to curriculum development. Human-centered design is all about building a deep empathy with the people you're designing for; generating tons of ideas; building prototypes; sharing those prototypes with the people you're designing for; and eventually implementing innovative new solutions. It provides opportunities for staff to think creatively and challenges them to always start with the question, "How might we ..." as they consider new opportunities for the user—which could be students, parents, or staff members.

Last year a small group of district administrators were trained in human-centered design and used the process to help guide strategic planning in the district. Over the summer, more than 120 local teachers and school leaders took to the streets of downtown Stillwater as part of a design thinking conference hosted by the district. The deep dive was part of the first-ever partnership between a Midwestern school district and Stanford's d.school. This year, the district is going even deeper and using human-centered design as it develops new opportunities for students.



Stonebridge Elementary Principal Derek Berg hopped on the bus with the student he shadowed to ensure he had the full student experience.

Here are just a few ways human-centered design is helping Stillwater rethink what school can be:

Strategic planning: District leaders engaged design thinking processes to gather feedback from the community and design a new strategic plan.



Principal Malinda Lansfeldt ate lunch along with the student she shadowed at Afton-Lakeland Elementary School.

Pony IdeaQuest: Staff members participate in a "crowd-based innovation" process that allows them to submit the next great idea to solve an issue they have encountered either personally as an employee, or that they've observed for our students or families. The entire staff can view all of the submitted ideas, and then vote for the ones they think should move forward. Last year, five ideas were selected to be further developed and piloted. The next idea quest begins in October.

Student innovation teams: Elementary and secondary students are being trained in the human-centered design process and given the opportunity to define a problem they've encountered within the system and ultimately submit their innovation solutions to district leaders for implementation.

High school innovation team: A group of teachers, counselors, and administrators are setting out to rethink high school to better engage students and provide more relevant learning experiences. They'll be using design thinking to build deep empathy for the students they're designing for and use student voice to help re-create the high school experience. Rather than replicate what's being done in other places, they're focused on designing something unique to Stillwater to meet the specific needs of our students and our communities.

"Our schools—like nearly all public schools in the nation—have been slow to change over the past 100 years," said Superintendent Denise Pontrelli. "Yet the world we're preparing our students for looks drastically different. It's exciting to see our staff, students and even our community begin to wonder what we might do differently to better serve our students and more fully engage them in their learning."

This month's member spotlight was submitted by Carissa Keister, community engagement manager, Stillwater Area Public Schools.

Special Education Cross-Subsidy Continues To Grow

It's well known that the special education cross-subsidy has been a financial stress for AMSD districts.

But 2018-19 may prove to be the most costly yet.

The latest special education cross-subsidy report, for FY 2017, shows that the statewide cross-subsidy rose to \$672.3 million. In just AMSD districts alone, special education costs exceeded state and federal education aid by more than \$427 million.

It's not projected to get better. While the state has made efforts to address the cross-subsidy, the statewide cross-subsidy is projected to grow to nearly \$708 million for 2018 — an increase of more than \$35 million. *And that's just for one year.*

Dr. Tom Melcher, Director of the Program Finance Division for the MN Department of Education, recently [told the Senate Committee on E-12 Education Policy](#) that the average district across the state is seeing higher cross-subsidies than ever before.

By definition, a cross-subsidy is the amount that a school district pays out of its general fund to cover budget shortfalls, after government aid doesn't cover the full amount of mandated programming.

Cross-subsidies are not unique to special education: English learner education, for example, accounts for its own cross-subsidy as well, with myriad mandates from the state and federal government.

A common misperception is that the special education cross-subsidy is primarily a federal issue because the federal government has never come close to covering its 40 percent share envisioned in the original Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. But even if the federal government met its goal of covering 40 percent of special education costs, the special education cross-subsidy would still have been \$249 million last year.

Regardless of who isn't paying, school districts ultimately have to cover the difference — often by enacting [drastic budget cuts](#), as noted recently by the Star Tribune.

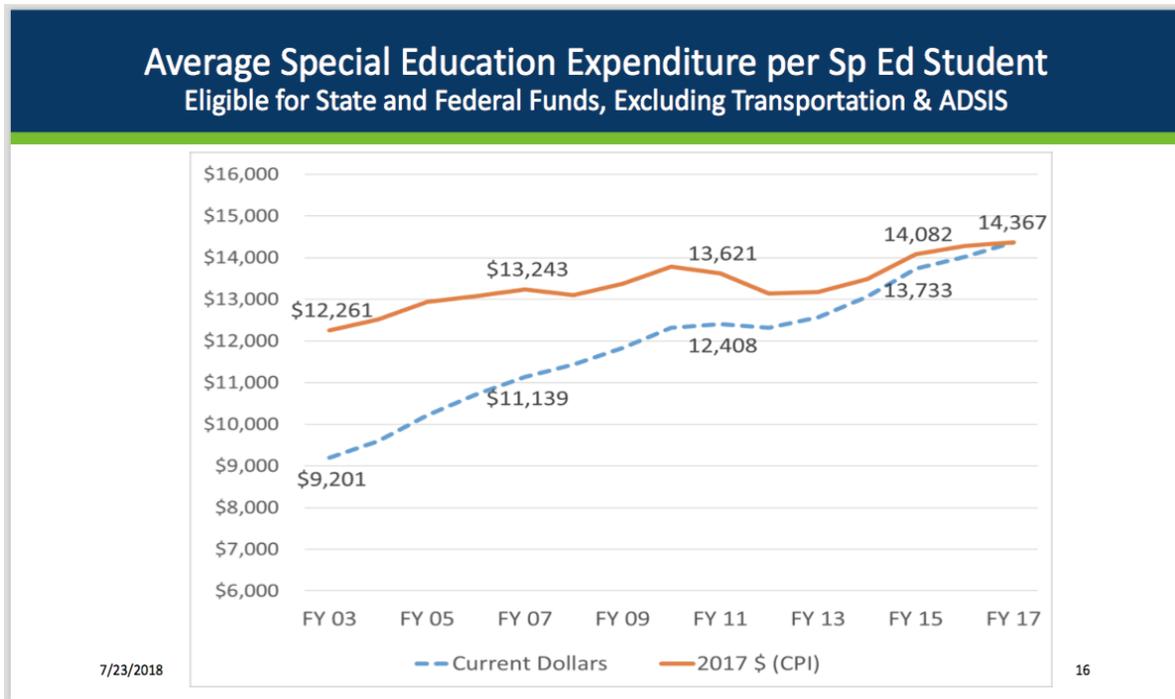
The biggest challenge, said Melcher: cost of service. “The cost of special education is growing,” Melcher said.

School districts of all sizes, large and small, are impacted by the growing special education cross-subsidy.

Columbia Heights, for example — with an enrollment of just more than 3,300 students last year — experienced a cross-subsidy of more than \$1,100 per-weighted-pupil, compared to the statewide average of \$757. Osseo, Richfield, Robbinsdale, Roseville, White Bear Lake, St. Cloud and Saint Paul Public Schools also had cross-subsidies of more than \$1,000 per-weighted-pupil. Minneapolis has the highest cross-subsidy of nearly \$1,500 per-weighted-pupil.

There is also the challenge of open enrollment.

Many districts are greatly impacted by what is referred to as “tuition billing.” When a student enrolls into a charter school, or a neighboring district, the new district provides the special education service but the resident districts receive a tuition bill to cover



Source: [Program Finance Division Minnesota Department of Education](#)

Senate Education Policy Committee Examines Special Education

Continued from page 3

the cost differences for providing the special education in the new district. These costs can include everything from transportation, to enrollment fees, to additional staffing such as paraprofessionals that ride buses with students. That can often amount to thousands of additional dollars.

As Dr. Melcher also told the Senate Education Policy Committee in August:

“The resident district has little opportunity to control the cost of special education services provided to its students who open enroll out of the district,” Melcher said. “And the tuition bills are often higher than what the district’s unfunded costs would be had it served these students within the district.”

Paul Ferrin, of MDE’s Special Education Funding and Data Division of School Finance, told the Committee in September that this tuition billing is frequently among the most confusing — and most costly — challenges for districts.

“The part that gets everyone ... it’s schools not being able to have any input or say in the cost,” Ferrin told the Committee.

The Committee, chaired by Sen. Eric Pratt, has committed to looking into policy changes for a remedy.

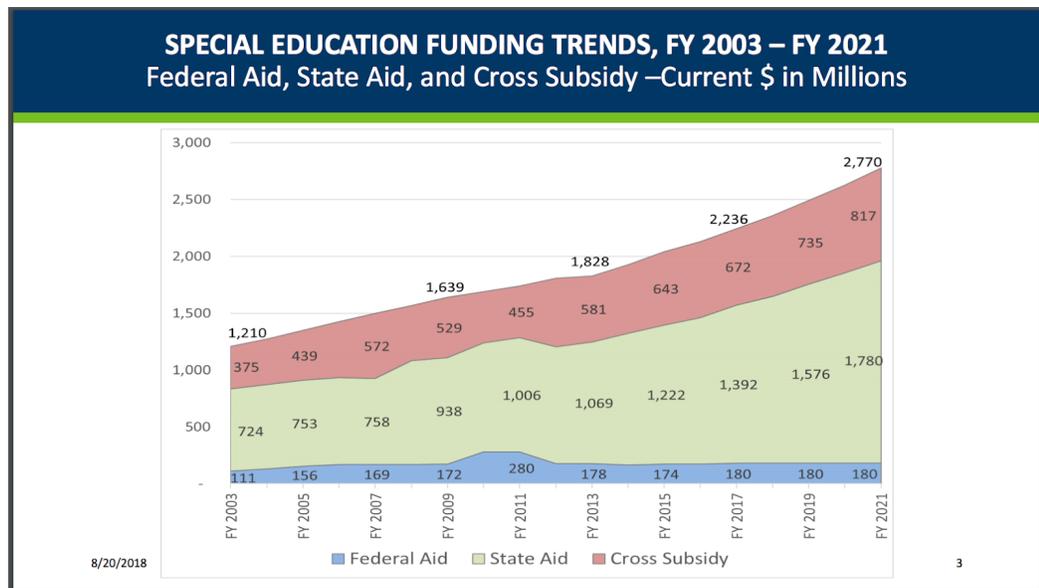
The Committee heard nearly two hours of testimony in September from staff of the St. Croix River Education District, who [gave several examples of how the burden of paperwork](#) often competes with providing direct service.

“Special educators use their prep time to complete paperwork, instead of planning for high quality, effective instruction, and they receive professional learning focused on due process paperwork, instead of on high-leverage instructional practices,” noted co-presenters Jamie Nord and Nicole Woodward.

The Committee is also looking to identify where state mandates for special education exceed federal mandates. Pratt has indicated he would like to see policies better aligned with federal standards when appropriate. “The idea is not to do away with all the mandates that exceed federal law,” Pratt said. “It’s the opportunity to look at what are appropriate and what aren’t. It’s to make sure we are doing what’s right for Minnesota students.”

One challenge, noted Daron Korte, Assistant Commissioner of MDE: Minnesota is one of only five states in the country to offer special education beginning at birth — which exceeds the federal mandate, which starts at age 3.

“We are very proud of the fact that Minnesota is a birth to 21 state,” Korte said. “It is something we would never recommend changing or removing.”



Source: [Program Finance Division Minnesota Department of Education](#)

AMSD Members: Anoka-Hennepin School District, Bloomington Public Schools, Brooklyn Center Community Schools, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District 191, Columbia Heights Public Schools, Eastern Carver County Schools, Eden Prairie Schools, Edina Public Schools, Elk River Area School District, Equity Alliance MN (Associate Member), Farmington Area Public Schools, Fridley Public Schools, Hopkins Public Schools, Intermediate School District 287, Intermediate School District 917 (Associate Member), Inver Grove Heights Schools, Lakeville Area Public Schools, Mahtomedi Public Schools, Metro ECSU (Associate Member), Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnetonka Public Schools, Mounds View Public Schools, North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District, Northeast Metro Intermediate School District 916, Northwest Suburban Integration District (Associate Member), Orono Schools, Osseo Area Schools, Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools, Richfield Public Schools, Robbinsdale Area Schools, Rochester Public Schools; Rockford Area Schools, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public Schools, Roseville Area Schools, Shakopee Public Schools, South St. Paul Public Schools, South Washington County Schools, SouthWest Metro Intermediate District, Spring Lake Park Schools, St. Anthony-New Brighton Independent School District, St. Cloud Area Schools, St. Louis Park Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, Stillwater Area Public Schools, Wayzata Public Schools, West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area Schools, Westonka, and White Bear Lake Area Schools.