



RICHARD FRAMPTON
303.906.5082
FRAMPTONCEP@GMAIL.COM

Cherry Creek School District
Executive Summary
Special Programs Staffing and Program Evaluation
Revised - April 8, 2026

This report was initiated at the request of Chris Smith, Superintendent; Scott Smith, Chief Financial and Operating Officer; and Tony Poole, Assistant Superintendent of Special Populations, on October 7, 2025, to examine current practices, systems, and outcomes related to Special Populations services and organizational supports.

This Executive Summary is based on interviews with district and school-based staff, school site visits, and a comprehensive review of student and staff data from Human Resources, Finance, and Special Populations. Throughout this process, all individuals involved were responsive and highly engaged in assessing current practices and efficiencies across the department.

Initial findings:

Mild/Moderate Needs Paraprofessionals

In the last two years, district practice has been to assign one Mild/Moderate Needs Paraprofessional to each Mild/Moderate Special Education Teacher. This practice has resulted in excessive staffing, as student need is not directly considered when allocating these positions. While the administration has eliminated these positions, it is recommended that minimum staffing levels be established to ensure appropriate staffing remains in each building. For example, schools without center-based programs rely more heavily on these additional Mild/Moderate paraprofessional supports. Ongoing evaluation of programming at these sites should be consistent to assess program needs.

Caseload Model for Programming

Ideally, caseload calculation should be used to determine staffing levels across programs. This model provides consistency, transparency, and a data-driven framework for staffing decisions.

It is recommended that the district re-establish a staffing range that defines when a school is considered over- or under-staffed and when staffing adjustments are reviewed. Staffing within a building should be adjusted in 0.5 FTE increments to allow flexibility and precision.

A preliminary review of the Special Education staffing indicates the following:

- Elementary (Mild/Moderate Needs): 33 schools fall below an 18:1 staffing ratio.
- Elementary (ILC): 11 programs fall below an 8:1 staffing ratio.
- Elementary (AN): 7 programs fall below a 6:1 staffing ratio.
- Middle School (Mild/Moderate Needs): 4 schools fall below an 18:1 staffing ratio.
- Middle School (ILC): 4 programs fall below an 8:1 staffing ratio.
- Middle School (AN): 4 programs fall below an 8:1 staffing ratio.
- High School (Mild/Moderate Needs): 3 schools fall below an 18:1 staffing ratio.
- High School (ILC and AN): None of the programs fall below a 10:1 ratio.

For comparison, the average caseload size across the Denver Metro region is:

- Mild/Moderate Elementary: 20:1
- Mild/Moderate Secondary: 25:1
- Center-Based (ILC, AN) K–12: 10:1
(Note: Significant student need can alter this ratio in a center-based classroom and must be considered by administration when making staffing decisions.)

These programs will be evaluated over the next year to establish District criteria for future staffing designs.

Mental Health Support

Without exception, principals emphasized the importance of maintaining adequate mental health support within their buildings. It was consistently reported that these staff members play a critical role in addressing the increasing behavioral and mental health needs of students. Interviews with Michelle Weinraub and Andrew Russell indicate that strong systems are currently in place, supported by meaningful data that drive appropriate staffing decisions.

There was consistent agreement among those interviewed that mental health support is designed to serve the entire student population within a building, not solely students with or without IEPs. This comprehensive model allows for greater efficiency and impact than a siloed approach in which mental health services are isolated within special education programming.

While there are areas to be considered for efficiency, these decisions need to be made based on specific building needs.

Nursing

When evaluating nursing services, it was noted that the district has previously made a commitment to providing a full-time nurse in every building. Similar to mental health services, this reflects a clear district priority on ensuring adequate nursing support in each school.

Elementary principals reported that the Health Liaison role is frequently utilized for duties beyond health services, including attendance monitoring and main office support. This practice appears consistent across the district and suggests opportunities for cost savings in this role as well. The Health Liaison position appears to be more essential at the secondary level, particularly in larger schools. Future staffing decisions should consider both overall school size and the impact of students with significant health needs when determining appropriate levels of nursing and health support staffing.

Additional Compensation

When reviewing the HR compensation data, many staff members receive “Additional Compensation” for various tasks. Examples of additional compensation include: Curriculum Development, Special Consideration Pay, Supplemental Pay, Student Achievement Incentive Pay - SAIP, National Board Certification - Teacher, and Schedule C.

This additional compensation needs to be reviewed by both the Special Education and HR departments to ensure these costs are essential.

Twice Exceptional Department

While interviewing building principals and Special Education Directors, it became evident that there is variability regarding administrative support structures for individual students within schools. Currently, students identified as twice exceptional receive administrative support through the Twice Exceptional Department, while all other students with IEPs are supported by the assigned Special Education Director.

In multiple interviews, principals described challenges associated with having multiple administrative points of contact. Principals also reported instances of inconsistent guidance or messaging across departments. This creates operational inefficiencies and can complicate decision-making, communication with families, and staff support.

To streamline administrative support and ensure consistent communication, the District should consider moving Twice Exceptional Services under the direct supervision of the Special Education Department. This will create a model in which each principal has a single administrative point of contact for all students with IEPs, including students identified as twice exceptional.

Human Resources Collaboration

Given the complexity of special education staffing, effective collaboration between Human Resources and Special Education Administration is essential to ensure compliance, fiscal accountability, and operational efficiency.

Key areas for strengthened collaboration include the following:

- Staff Vetting and Rehiring Practices
- Position conversions
- Position control for positions related to students
- Consistency across job classifications

Data for future staffing decisions

While engaging in the process to determine staffing needs, it became evident that the necessary data has historically not been readily available. Throughout the course of this consultation (October–April), the Special Education Leadership team has made significant efforts to address this concern. The development of the new Special Education Dashboard represents meaningful progress and is already proving to be a valuable tool for tracking students across the district.

To further strengthen data-driven staffing decisions, caseload and service delivery tracking should be compiled and made easily accessible.

Severity Rating Scale

Cherry Creek School District currently utilizes a Severity Rating Scale to support staffing determinations, particularly at the elementary level. It is recommended that the Severity Rating Scale be used as one data point within a broader body of evidence when determining staffing needs. Additional data should include IEP service minutes, the number of students at each grade level, and unique student circumstances.

Service Delivery Minutes

Further investigation is needed regarding building-level special education IEP teams' understanding of how IEP minutes are determined for individual students. Inconsistent

practices currently exist across providers. Due to significant programming differences across elementary, middle, and high school levels, IEPs are not consistently written in a manner that supports seamless student transitions between levels. Establishing consistent training and district-wide practices for determining service delivery based on student need would alleviate this concern.

Role of the Principal in the Process

A common theme emerged in interviews with building principals regarding a lack of clarity and understanding of the process used to determine special education and health services staffing. There is a need for a clearly defined and transparent process for assessing staffing needs at the building level. Principals must be directly involved in this process, as they are responsible for the overall operation of their schools and the implementation of services. The use of basic program staffing ratios, combined with student need and program requirements, would support greater consistency, clarity, and shared understanding in staffing decisions.

Process for Determining Eligibility and Percentage of Students Identified

When reviewing districtwide data, discrepancies are evident in the percentage of students identified for special education services across schools. It is recommended that further investigation be conducted to identify the root causes of these discrepancies and to ensure consistent eligibility determination practices across the district.

The Colorado Department of Education statewide data should be used as a reference point when evaluating district and building-level identification patterns.

Programming efficiencies

Throughout the school visits, the Special Education Directors consistently referred to the need for a “constellation of services” as a necessary shift in the district’s programming philosophy.

When programming within a building is more fluid, staff are able to work with students across program areas rather than being restricted to a single service model. This approach supports more comprehensive and responsive services for students while also increasing staffing efficiency and maximizing available expertise.

Transportation

There are populations of students, based on individual needs and/or the location of programming, that appropriately require Specialized Transportation services through the IEP process. During the visit to the Transportation Department, it was determined that

data is not currently collected for students assigned to receive Specialized Transportation.

It is recommended that the Special Education Department, in collaboration with the Transportation Department, establish three categories for collecting data regarding Specialized Transportation:

- A. Students who require special equipment
- B. Students who are transported to a program outside of their neighborhood school
- C. All other students

Once specific data is collected on the students receiving Specialized Transportation, we can effectively evaluate the programming needs and make future recommendations regarding potential efficiencies.

It is also recommended that a comprehensive training program be developed for individuals serving as Director Designees on IEP teams regarding the determination of eligibility for Specialized Transportation. Establishing a clear and consistent process for documenting and communicating this need, including collaboration between the Directors of Special Education and the Director of Transportation, will ensure that students receiving this service have a clearly defined and appropriate justification based on their needs.

ESY

It is premature to use current Extended School Year (ESY) numbers to assess program efficiency, as many ESY eligibility determinations are made during the spring semester. Historically, ESY eligibility has been reported as being excessively high, which has contributed to increased costs. Similar to the determination of Specialized Transportation, there appears to be limited consistency across buildings in how ESY eligibility is established.

Establishing a clear and standardized process, along with targeted training for individuals serving as IEP Director Designees, would support more consistent and defensible ESY eligibility determinations. This would help ensure that ESY services are provided based on documented student need and may reduce the potential for over-identification.

Aspiring Educator Pathway Teacher Program

This program is in its first year within the Special Education Department. Those interviewed consistently reflected both an awareness of early implementation challenges and confidence in the program's long-term promise. It is anticipated that this

pathway will develop high-quality special education providers in the coming years and serve as a sustainable staffing pipeline for the district.

The team is optimistic that, with this foundational year of learning, participants will be well-positioned in their second year to begin contributing to student service delivery. Ongoing monitoring of this progression will support the program's continued alignment between expectations, support structures, and service delivery, and remain aligned as the program matures.

Use of Contractors

Upon review of the history of using contracted staffing, it is evident that the team has made significant progress in reducing reliance on contracted personnel. As the district prepares for future years, the following contractors are in the process of being converted to Cherry Creek School District employees:

- Speech-Language Pathology (SLP) Contractors
- Occupational Therapy (OT) Contractors
- Sign Language Interpreter Contractors

Once these transitions are complete, it is recommended that contracted staff be utilized only for short-term, emergency situations. Contracted services should not serve as a long-term staffing model. As staffing reductions occur across the department, vacancies should be filled, when appropriate, with qualified staff from positions being reduced elsewhere in the district. This approach will support fiscal responsibility while maintaining service continuity and maximizing the use of existing district personnel.

Out of District Costs

The placement of students in outside facilities is a reality that all special education departments face. There will always be a population of students whose needs exceed what can be provided within a comprehensive school setting. Cherry Creek has made significant efforts to develop internal programming to reduce the number of students who must receive their Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in a facility setting.

Because these placements represent the most restrictive special education environment, it is essential that each placement be evaluated on an individual student basis multiple times throughout the year. This ensures that the services being provided remain appropriate, effective, and aligned with the student's FAPE.

It is recommended that Cherry Creek engage in contract negotiations with the programs most frequently utilized.

Summary

Cherry Creek School District demonstrates a strong commitment to supporting students with disabilities through comprehensive programming, highly dedicated staff, and a clear prioritization of student services. Throughout this evaluation, district leadership and school-based teams consistently exhibited professionalism, deep knowledge of their programs, and a genuine focus on meeting the needs of students. The district has made significant investments in special education, mental health, nursing, and related services, which reflects a student-centered philosophy and a willingness to allocate resources where need is greatest.

Notable strengths include the development of internal programming designed to reduce reliance on outside placements, strong districtwide emphasis on mental health supports, a commitment to full-time nursing coverage in schools, and continued progress in reducing dependence on contracted service providers. The creation of the new Special Education dashboard is a significant advancement and provides a strong foundation for improved data-informed staffing and programming decisions. Additionally, the Aspiring Educator Pathway Program shows promise as a long-term staffing pipeline that can support future workforce stability.

Recommended Next Steps

- Evaluate special education caseloads and implement a consistent, systemwide process with common criteria for determining caseload size, ensuring equitable staffing across all buildings and programs.
- Complete a full audit of the Summer 2026 ESY programming to locate areas of efficiencies and inefficiencies. Create a plan to implement best practices for the Summer of 2027.
- Evaluate positions identified for reduction or elimination with careful consideration of impacts on current staff and students. Ensure reductions are guided by student needs and implemented strategically, using a data-driven and appropriately phased approach.
- Implement standardized training for IEP Director Designees related to key determinations, including Specialized Transportation, ESY eligibility, and service delivery minutes. This training should emphasize student needs, compliance, and consistency across buildings.
- Establish clear, districtwide processes for determining staffing needs that include consistent principal involvement and transparent decision-making protocols.

Staffing decisions should be grounded in data, caseload models, and clearly defined program ratios rather than historical practice or building schedules.

- When appropriate, adopt a caseload-based staffing model across all levels with clearly defined upper and lower staffing ranges and adjustments made in 0.5 FTE increments. This will support equitable staffing, prevent over- or under-allocation of resources, and create predictability in budget planning.
- Continue to strengthen data systems by expanding the use of the Special Education dashboard and ensuring that caseloads, IEP service minutes, and service delivery models are consistently tracked and accessible. Priority should be given to developing a robust system for monitoring IEP minutes, as this will replace less objective tools and support more accurate staffing determinations.
- Move intentionally toward a “constellation of services” model by encouraging cross-program collaboration within buildings. This includes increasing opportunities for joint planning among special education teams, shared staffing models, and flexible service delivery structures.
- Review Specialized Transportation assignments and facility placements using a clear categorization system, stronger documentation, and regular student-level evaluation.
- Given the recent leadership changes, provide targeted consultation and coaching to the special education leadership team to support continuity of programming, communication, and organizational stability throughout the transition.

Together, these next steps provide a structured path forward that strengthens systems, increases efficiency, protects service quality, and supports long-term sustainability while honoring the district's strong commitment to students and staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Frampton', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

Richard Frampton