



TARGETED SERVICES REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, SUMMER 2020

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In November 2019, Ignite Afterschool hired [WithInsight](#) to conduct a research project on the Targeted Services funding stream in Minnesota. The intent of Targeted Services is to provide out-of-school time support to “at-risk students” in grades K-8 in order to help them be successful during the school day. Targeted Services are only available to districts with an ALC, and students must meet one of twelve criteria to qualify. As one of the main funding sources for out-of-school time programming in the state, the Targeted Services funding stream is critical. The goals of the project were to learn:

1. What works well with Targeted Services.
2. The challenges districts face with Targeted Services.
3. How the funding stream could be improved.

Ignite formed an advisory group with representatives from its partner organizations to guide the project and inform the research design. The project included both quantitative and qualitative data collection from 36 districts across the state, representing districts from urban, suburban and Greater Minnesota regions. In March 2020, the COVID19 crisis hit the United States, and we adapted data collection to ask questions about how the crisis would impact summer planning and implementation for Targeted Services.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

School districts view the Targeted Services funding stream as a vital way to enhance student learning for those who need it the most. While our research showed that there is little opposition to changing the status quo, we learned that the greatest fear expressed by district staff is the loss of the funding stream. Evaluation of Targeted Services also supports its value. Although evaluation of the funding stream has been limited since its inception, the 2010 Alternative Education Evaluation Report from the Office of the Legislative Auditor shows promising results: “When we measured growth on standardized tests between 2008 and 2009, students in kindergarten through eighth grade who attended extended-time programs called ‘targeted services’ generally increased their test scores more than other students.”

Through our research, we learned that the key challenges districts face impact the quality of student experiences and the ability to achieve the funding stream’s goals. The most common challenges identified across districts were (in order of frequency):

1. Recruitment of licensed teachers.
2. Level of funding provided.
3. Restrictions on allowable activities.
4. Inability to serve all students.

District leaders clearly articulated how the challenges are interrelated and often compound one another. For example, when districts cannot recruit enough licensed teachers, they are not able to serve all eligible students. They are forced to create waiting lists or turn students away. Additionally, this affects program quality. Some districts increase class sizes in response to teacher shortages; others reduce the number of days a student can participate. Regardless, out-of-school time research demonstrates that both dosage and class sizes are key factors that contribute to student outcomes.

The amount of funding available similarly influences the quality of programming and exacerbates the teacher recruitment challenge. Our literature review along with key informant meetings confirmed that Targeted Services funding has essentially remained stagnant since 2002. The reimbursement level limits how much districts can pay teachers, a factor in teacher recruitment. Moreover, limited funding often leads districts to increase class sizes to save costs; class sizes influence both teacher satisfaction and the quality of the learning experience for students. Many districts attribute low funding levels to challenges in serving high-needs students; for example, without funding for additional services, special education students often cannot participate. Finally, without adequate funding, districts cannot afford important administrative functions like program coordination, transportation and evaluation, aspects that are essential to delivering high-quality programming.

In addition to examining the challenges of Targeted Services, we also asked school districts about the technical assistance and support they receive related to the funding stream. Throughout our research and data collection, we found some confusion about what is legally required of districts and what is a recommended guideline. The levels of understanding vary across districts and individuals, and some district leaders articulated that the instructions from the Minnesota Department of Education have created confusion. Many districts also expressed a desire for additional support related to Targeted Services, such as the opportunity to learn from other districts and learn about best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the project's findings, we recommend the following actions. Ignite should work with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to advocate for these next steps:

- Investigate how Targeted Services legislation or interpretation of statute could be changed to incorporate utilization of non-licensed instructors.
- Clarify what is legally required of districts and what is a recommended guideline from MDE; ensure that the written documentation matches the verbal guidance provided by MDE staff.
- Enhance the technical assistance and support provided to districts regarding Targeted Services. MDE can partner with organizations like Ignite to provide professional development and other opportunities to learn about best practices and from other districts.
- Advocate for an increase in the reimbursement rates for Targeted Services or an increase in the allowable Average Daily Membership (ADM) limit, which is currently 0.2 ADMs.

Additionally, Ignite needs to determine its role in supporting Targeted Services across the state. Some leaders desire additional support, including opportunities to learn about best practices and share across districts. The report also highlighted the limited evaluation and continuous improvement efforts related to Targeted Services. As the statewide network for afterschool, these could fall within the scope of Ignite's mission.

To provide timely input during a period of rapid decision making at MDE, Ignite authored a memo to the Commissioner on April 27, 2020 that outlined recommendations specific to Targeted Services guidance for the summer of 2020 based on the findings related to the impact of the pandemic:

- Provide guidance for alternative ways to count "seat time" that allows for reimbursement; the guidance should clarify that digital instruction is reimbursable and that one-on-one and small group interventions are allowable.
- Waive the need for a continuous learning plan (CLP), especially for students who already have a 504 plan or IEP; if a waiver is not possible, allow for digital signatures from parents.
- Allow for non-licensed instructors under the supervision of a licensed staff person, after licensed teachers have right of refusal.

As the effects of the pandemic continue into the next school year, Ignite can advocate for an effective use of Targeted Services to address equity and access issues during the crises.