

Episode 3 | How Michigan's Intermediate School Districts Support Special Education

Well, welcome to the Unpacked Podcast. I am Mickey O'Neill.

I am your host today, and I am joined by our superintendent of Ingham ISD, Jason Malema. Hello.

So glad to be back here unpacking educational topics with you today. Well, thanks.

Thanks for joining us. Today we want to talk a little bit about special education.

Many people don't truly understand what special education is and the broad scope of needs for our students.

Can you share the 13 disabilities that are covered under special education and maybe how some of the services vary?

Sure. So special education is a pretty large topic when we think about the depth and breadth of what's going on.

But let me hit on those 13 service areas that are recognized under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, more commonly known as IDEA.

They are autism spectrum disorder, known as ASD; physical impairments; cognitive impairments; severe multiple impairments; deaf/blindness; specific learning disabilities; deaf or hard of hearing; speech and language impairments; early childhood developmental delays; traumatic brain injuries; emotional impairments; visual impairments; or otherwise health impairments.

So 13 different areas that are recognized at this point in time.

IDEA is the law that governs and gives us an understanding of best practices when it comes to how we provide supports for students with disabilities.

The origins of IDEA date back to 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was approved. In 1990, it was reauthorized as IDEA.

There are other laws, such as the ADA, that have come into play since then, but IDEA is the primary governing structure for special education.

Can you share a little bit about the learning environment for students and what we mean by the term least restrictive environment and how that supports student learning?

Before jumping into least restrictive environment, or LRE, it is important to talk about FAPE, free and appropriate public education.

Within IDEA is the requirement that we provide FAPE for students with disabilities.

Providing FAPE means educating students in the least restrictive environment, meaning we do not place students in environments that are more restrictive than necessary.

At its best, this means serving students alongside their neurotypical peers.

Many students, with the right supports, can remain in their local school district and receive services in general education settings.

Some students may need pull-out supports, such as a resource room, or push-in supports from a paraprofessional who helps with reading or other concepts.

These are typical special education services provided in schools.

Beyond that are regional programs, which may involve students attending a program in a neighboring district.

In those settings, students may have similar challenges and goals outlined in their IEPs and still spend part of the day with neurotypical peers.

More restrictive environments include center-based schools, which serve students with more significant disabilities who need highly specialized supports.

Beekman and Heartwood are examples within Ingham ISD of center-based schools serving students with more severe disabilities.

Beyond that would be clinical or hospital-based settings, which fall outside the scope of school-based services.

Determining the least restrictive environment is challenging and requires reviewing data, services available, and each student's individual needs.

It is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

So to summarize, students may receive services in their local classroom with built-in supports or through pull-out services like occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech services.

Some students attend specialized programs within or outside their district, and others attend center-based programs operated by ISDs for higher needs.

Exactly. The goal is to provide FAPE in the least restrictive environment while allowing students to grow socially with their peers as much as possible.

Maybe we can also talk a little about what an IEP is for those who are not in the education world.

An IEP is an individualized education plan created for a student who qualifies under one of the 13 disability areas.

The plan is developed collaboratively with parents, general education teachers, and special education staff.

Together, the team determines the appropriate supports needed for that specific student.

IEPs vary widely depending on the student.

Some students may need minimal support, such as brief speech services every few weeks.

Others may need more intensive support, such as time in a resource room with a smaller student-to-staff ratio.

That is the strength of an IEP — it allows schools to tailor supports to meet individual needs.

Thank you for joining us today. That is all the time we have, but we appreciate you helping us unpack the challenges and realities of public education.

We look forward to catching you next time when we unpack it.



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