



## **SSD Blueprint for Equity Executive Summary**

### **I. Overview of District**

Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD) was formed in December 1957 after St. Louis County voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum establishing a countywide local school district to support the educational needs of children with disabilities.

At the same time, voters indicated the value they placed on educating children with disabilities by including in the referendum a countywide tax levy to fund the District. This investment by the community provides a separate dedicated funding source to support SSD's programs and services. SSD's unique status as a countywide public school district with its own tax base provides stability as well as equal access to a quality education for students across the county.

Also significant is the fact that this progressive approach to educating children with disabilities was put in place more than 17 years before the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted by Congress. The IDEA mandates that children with disabilities have the right to a free appropriate public education.

Today, more than 23,000 students — or one out of six public school students in St. Louis County — receive special education services from SSD. The vast majority — about 97 percent — receive services from SSD staff in their home school in the district in which they live. About 750 students with more significant disabilities are educated in one of the District's five special education schools. The District also provides after-school special education services to students who attend private, parochial and independent schools, and serves those who are home-schooled or who are homebound for medical or other reasons. SSD offers a full range of related services, such as speech therapy, social work services, occupational therapy and assistive technology services, which are considered during the development of the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

SSD also operates two technical high schools — North Technical High School in Florissant and South Technical High School in Sunset Hills — that offer more than 30 career and technical education programs to about 1,600 high school students throughout St. Louis County. Technical course offerings range from traditional technical fields, such as precision machining and construction, to network administration and health sciences. Programs at these schools accept applications from 10th through 12th grade students in St. Louis County. Each program receives input from industry advisers who have first-hand knowledge of their particular industry.

In addition to the tens of thousands of students it serves every year, SSD employs thousands of staff to deliver programs and services to students throughout an area that encompasses more than 500 square miles. Simply put, SSD impacts the lives of more students over a wider area than any other school district in the county.



## II. Background on Equity Issue at SSD

SSD's mission sets the tone for why the District exists. Our core values describe what is important to the organization. SSD's vision – Partners for Every Student's Success – captures the unique nature of the District not only to provide a quality education, but also to partner with other school districts, parents and the community so that every student, regardless of educational or environmental challenges, can be successful.

With the District's vision in mind, in 2011, after serious discussion and careful consideration, the SSD Board of Education determined that the issue of equity was so important to the District and its stakeholders that it should be added as a District core value. The Board further defined equity as "the process whereby every student in St. Louis County served by SSD is provided with whatever he or she needs so as to equalize the opportunity to learn." This definition along with the intent of the District's vision set the course for the District's work toward continuously improving the equity of services available to students.

Initial work on equity began with a Board subcommittee, which later expanded to a task force with a wider range of stakeholders. After identifying several areas of concern, the task force requested the assistance of a consulting firm with educational expertise to provide an unbiased approach to defining and collecting data, and to suggest further action to be taken.

Analyses were provided through:

- An operational audit that studied SSD's administrative structure that supports partner district programs and services. Recommendations included formalizing an Educational Partnership Agreement between SSD and each partner district, which has been achieved, and three management models that are being considered.
- An initial equity study in which data was analyzed for four broad categories of operations – teacher preparation and quality, special education and related services, career and technical education, and equity in contracting and recruiting. Quantitative in nature, the study yielded information that required a more qualitative analysis.
- A second study to provide a qualitative look at the District. Numerous focus groups and interviews were held to gather voice of customer from District stakeholders, and additional recommendations for improvement.

In considering how to provide services more equitably across St. Louis County, several factors present unique challenges:

- Each student served by SSD is unique. Services provided for a student with a disability, which are outlined in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), can vary widely depending on the complexity of the needs of the individual student.
- The partner districts vary in many ways, including in size, resources, personnel, physical facilities, academic and social experiences of students, instructional approaches, curricula and academic performance results.



### III. SSD Blueprint for Equity

In approaching the issue of improving equity within the diverse populations served by SSD in St. Louis County, the District reviewed statistical data, and the legal, historical, cultural and financial forces that affect those numbers.

Armed with this information, and with an awareness of the unique needs of students as well as the differences among partner districts, an equity goal for the District was developed.

**GOAL:** Ensure equitable staffing levels and access to quality services

The District has developed eight objectives related to equity – four regarding equitable staffing levels and four dealing with equitable access to quality services. The purpose of all of the objectives is to improve what we do as a District to support the needs of our students.

#### OBJECTIVES – EQUITABLE STAFFING LEVELS

##### **Teacher Staffing Levels**

**Objective 1.1** By January 2019, the District will use revised staffing guidelines to deploy staff across the county to address student needs and better match partner district and school needs with SSD resources.

- **Rationale:** We need to have the right staff with the right skills in the right locations so that the needs of students can be met.

##### **Area Coordinator Staffing Levels**

**Objective 1.2** By January 2018, the District will continue to improve workload distribution of partner district Area Coordinators.

- **Rationale:** Effective supervision of teachers and other staff will allow for the focus to be on student learning and outcomes.

##### **Recruitment**

**Objective 1.3** By December 2019, develop a “grow our own” program.

- **Rationale:** By providing supports to current SSD paraprofessionals to pursue teaching certificates, students will gain dedicated teachers who are familiar with the District and already committed to students we serve.

##### **Retention, New Teachers**

**Objective 1.4** By December 2019, improve supports provided to teachers new to SSD.

- **Rationale:** Students deserve high-quality experienced teachers. Providing new teachers with support, including mentoring and quality professional development, increases the likelihood that they will stay with the District, thereby reducing turnover, supporting stability and improving continuity of services.



## **OBJECTIVES – EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY SERVICES**

### **Least Restrictive Environment**

**Objective 2.1** By December 2019, design and implement considerations for ensuring services are designed in a consistent manner throughout the county.

- **Rationale:** Ensure that a full range of services are available countywide to meet the needs of students and that staff are aware and knowledgeable of these services.

### **Quality Services – High Leverage Practices**

**Objective 2.2** By December 2019, explore and define quality services and programs across the 22 partner districts.

- **Rationale:** Identifying effective services and programs that are working well with students can lead to duplication of those best practices for the benefit of other students.

### **Quality Services – Cultural Proficiency**

**Objective 2.3** By June 2019, develop professional development to increase cultural proficiency of all staff.

- **Rationale:** Increasing knowledge and awareness of attitudes, perspectives and behavior in all the communities we serve will lead to a better appreciation and understanding of the students' backgrounds and experiences.

### **Quality Services – Trauma-informed Practices**

**Objective 2.4** By June 2019, increase staff familiarity with trauma-informed practices.

- **Rationale:** For maximum learning to occur, students need to feel secure. Understanding how trauma impacts education allows schools to become safe, supportive environments.