
Autism Spectrum Disorder Services in Public Schools

Program Evaluation Description

February 2026

BACKGROUND

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability characterized by differences in an individual's social interaction, communication, and behavior.¹ As a "spectrum disorder," individuals with ASD have a wide range of abilities; two people with ASD may vary widely in terms of their skills and needs.

Minnesota's school districts and other education entities—including charter schools, cooperatives, and others—are required by state and federal laws to provide special education services for all public school students who have disabilities, including students with ASD. Students with ASD may receive a variety of special education services depending on a student's individual need, including specialized support outside of the regular education classroom or access to assistive technology.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is responsible for ensuring that Minnesota's school districts comply with state and federal special education requirements for public school students. Among other responsibilities, MDE must review and approve school districts' special education budget proposals, address complaints about districts' compliance with law, and generally monitor districts' compliance.

In Minnesota, the cost of special education services for students with ASD and the number of students receiving services have increased over time. MDE reported that state spending on special education services for students whose "primary disability" was ASD grew from about \$300 million in Fiscal Year 2020 to over \$400 million in Fiscal Year 2024. In that same

period, MDE reported that the number of students whose primary disability was ASD grew from nearly 22,000 to almost 27,000 students.

PRELIMINARY EVALUATION ISSUES

1. To what extent are appropriate special education services available to students with ASD in Minnesota public schools?
2. How well does MDE coordinate with and oversee school districts to ensure appropriate services are available and provided?

DISCUSSION

Although various entities in Minnesota provide services to students with ASD, this evaluation will focus on services provided by public schools. In doing so, we will interview MDE staff, public school staff and administrators, and other stakeholders. We will also visit a select number of public schools to observe ASD services. Further, we will review state and federal special education laws to understand the state's role in providing ASD services. We will also review relevant MDE policies, procedures, and process documents and analyze relevant MDE data.

We will determine other evaluation methods after we have gathered additional information about the topic. For example, we may survey stakeholders, review a sample of student special education files, or conduct case studies of ASD services provided at a small number of schools.

This evaluation is scheduled to be completed in early 2027. For additional information, contact Caitlin Badger, evaluation manager, at 651-297-1917 or Caitlin.Badger@state.mn.us.

¹ We use the term "autism spectrum disorder" to be consistent with language in Minnesota law. However, it is important to note that viewpoints differ with regard to how to best refer to individuals with ASD.