

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Services in Public Schools

Topic Selection Background Information

November 2025

Program Overview	Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder characterized by differences in an individual’s social interaction, communication, and behavior. Public schools must provide special education services to eligible students with disabilities, including ASD. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is responsible for ensuring that schools comply with state and federal requirements regarding special education.
Original Evaluation Questions	To what extent does Minnesota provide appropriate supports to individuals living with ASD and their families? How well do state agencies coordinate with each other, school districts, and providers to deliver services? How effectively do state agencies ensure that ASD service providers meet applicable requirements?
Revised Questions	To what extent are appropriate special education services available to students with ASD in Minnesota public schools? How well does MDE coordinate with and oversee school districts to ensure appropriate services are available and provided?
State Resources <i>High</i>	In Fiscal Year 2024, Minnesota public schools spent more than \$400 million on special education services for students whose “primary disability” was ASD. In this same fiscal year, the state appropriated roughly \$2.3 billion and received about \$21 million from the federal government for all special education services.
State Control <i>Medium</i>	Federal law ensures that students with a disability, including ASD, “have available to them a free appropriate public education” structured to meet their needs. To receive federal funding, states must fulfill certain requirements for the provision and oversight of special education services. State law also requires schools to provide special education and expands requirements in some instances.
Impact <i>High</i>	People with ASD can have a range of abilities. Special education supports students through individualized plans and services designed to meet their specific educational needs. Of the students receiving special education services in Minnesota in 2025, the second largest group (nearly 30,000 students or 17 percent) were those whose “primary disability” was ASD.
Timeliness <i>Medium</i>	The number of students using special education services has grown. Since 2015, the number of students with a “primary disability” of ASD using special education has increased by 71 percent.
Feasibility <i>Medium</i>	If we narrow the evaluation to focus on ASD services in public schools, as proposed, the evaluation is more feasible. OLA could conduct an evaluation using standard research methods. However, OLA would likely need to limit the scope of review to a sample of school districts.
Balance <i>High</i>	OLA last evaluated special education in 2013, but it has never specifically evaluated how students with ASD are supported by these services.
Discussion	Special education helps ensure that students with ASD can learn in a manner that meets their needs. Given the increase in students determined to have ASD who use special education services, this evaluation could provide useful information about these services.