

Autism Spectrum Disorder Services in Public Schools

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

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| 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 receiving special education has increased by 71 percent. |
| Feasibility <i>Medium</i> | If we narrow the evaluation to focus on education, 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. |

Enterprise Talent Development

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

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| Program Overview | Minnesota Management and Budget's (MMB's) Enterprise Talent Development (ETD) provides training and resources to state and other public employees. ETD provides required training for new state supervisors and managers and required annual training for state employees on topics such as respectful workplace policies. It also provides other training and resources on a variety of topics, including leadership development, team collaboration, and retirement planning. |
| Evaluation Questions | To what extent does ETD provide appropriate and effective training for state employees? What standards, if any, does ETD use to develop and/or approve training? |
| State Resources <i>Low</i> | MMB collects fees from agencies whose employees participate in ETD trainings. In Fiscal Year 2024, MMB's Enterprise Employee Resources unit, which includes not only ETD in addition but is also tasked with other responsibilities related to statewide human resources management, spent just over \$10 million. |
| State Control <i>High</i> | Statutes direct MMB to develop and implement training, including required training on certain topics, and training policies applicable to state executive branch employees. |
| Impact <i>Medium</i> | ETD offers training to over 57,000 state employees. Local government employees may also participate in ETD training. |
| Timeliness <i>Medium</i> | Concerns were recently raised about the appropriateness of an article that could be accessed through two of ETD's training courses; according to MMB's Commissioner, MMB's leadership directed ETD to remove the article and directed a review of training content. |
| Feasibility <i>High</i> | OLA could complete this evaluation using standard evaluation techniques such as interviews, surveys, and document reviews. |
| Balance <i>High</i> | OLA has never evaluated ETD. OLA completed a review of best practices for state employee training in 1995. |
| Discussion | We are not aware of persistent concerns about the appropriateness of ETD training, but the proposed evaluation is feasible and could be informative. |

State Oversight of Long-Term Care Insurance

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

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| Program Overview | Long-term care insurance provides coverage for the costs of care for individuals who cannot care for themselves due to prolonged illness or disability. It may cover services such as at-home, assisted living, or nursing facility care. The Minnesota Department of Commerce (Commerce) is responsible for reviewing and approving long-term care insurance policies offered for sale in the state, as well as reviewing and approving proposed rate increases. |
| Evaluation Questions | Does Minnesota have adequate laws in place to protect against unreasonable increases in rates for long-term care insurance? To what extent has Commerce provided sufficient oversight of the rates providers are charging? |
| State Resources <i>Low</i> | Expenditures for Commerce’s Insurance Division in Fiscal Year 2024 were about \$10.6 million. That amount included spending for all of the department’s insurance regulatory activities, so the expenditures for long-term care activities would be just a portion of that figure. |
| State Control <i>Medium-High</i> | Both state and federal laws govern insurance companies, but review and approval of rates is a state function. |
| Impact <i>High</i> | According to data from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, there were about 200,000 Minnesotans covered by long-term care insurance policies at the end of 2022. |
| Timeliness <i>Medium</i> | Long-term care insurance—and specifically fast-increasing premiums—has been a topic of interest for at least a decade. Commerce published special reports on long-term care insurance in 2015 and 2016 in response to legislative concerns. That said, there is no particular advantage to addressing this topic this year. |
| Feasibility <i>Medium</i> | We could evaluate Commerce’s oversight of long-term care insurance using standard techniques. Depending on how the project is scoped, we may retain an external consultant with actuarial expertise. |
| Balance <i>Medium</i> | OLA last completed a program evaluation at Commerce in 2022. |
| Discussion | Ratepayers in states across the nation have complained about large increases in their long-term care insurance premiums. However, the fact that these concerns are widespread suggests that the underlying issues may be systemic and not related to any individual state’s regulatory activities. Therefore, a program evaluation may not address these concerns. |

Taxpayers' Transportation Accountability Act

Topic Selection Background Information

April 2025

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| Program Overview | The Taxpayers' Transportation Accountability Act (TTAA) requires the Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to estimate the costs of certain state highway transportation projects before entering into private contracts. For projects estimated to cost more than \$250,000, MnDOT must determine that department staff could not do the work at a lower price before entering into private contracts. In Fiscal Year 2024, MnDOT outsourced all TTAA-governed projects—including 20 projects MnDOT estimated that department staff could have completed at a lower cost—primarily citing lack of staff availability. |
| Evaluation Questions | To what extent has MnDOT complied with contracting requirements in the TTAA? To what extent are the factors MnDOT uses to evaluate costs of performing work itself versus contracting out for a project appropriate and consistent? How effective has TTAA been at achieving its policy goals? How has the budgeting process affected MnDOT's ability to capitalize on potential savings? |
| State Resources <i>Medium</i> | In Fiscal Year 2024, MnDOT reported that it executed 113 private transportation contracts subject to TTAA requirements, which totaled over \$71 million. |
| State Control <i>High</i> | MnDOT is responsible for improving state roads and managing transportation contracts. State law establishes the TTAA and requirements for private transportation contracts. |
| Impact <i>High</i> | The state's trunk highway system has a significant impact on those who use the state's roads. State-managed roads comprise less than 10 percent of Minnesota's roads but carry approximately 60 percent of total traffic volume. |
| Timeliness <i>Medium</i> | While there is no urgent reason for an evaluation that we are aware of, the state's highway system continues to age and become increasingly expensive to maintain. |
| Feasibility <i>High</i> | OLA could evaluate the department's compliance with the TTAA using standard evaluation techniques, including document reviews, surveys, data analysis, and interviews. |
| Balance <i>Medium</i> | OLA evaluated aspects of MnDOT projects and contracting in 2016, 2019, and 2021 but has never examined the department's compliance with the TTAA. |
| Discussion | Since the TTAA took effect in 2009, MnDOT has executed 994 contracts subject to its requirements. MnDOT plans to invest significantly in the state's highway system in the coming years, so now may be an appropriate time to evaluate MnDOT's compliance with the TTAA. |