

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: **Special Education & Intervention** **Service Delivery Review**

Malden Public Schools

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INTRODUCTION

This executive summary presents key findings from a comprehensive review of special education, intervention, and inclusive practices within Malden Public Schools. The complete report was created through the triangulation of multiple data sources. Data collected includes the following sources:

- Demographic data for students with disabilities and type of services and programming placements received
- Achievement data
- Disproportionality data
- Classroom observations across Malden Public Schools
 - These classroom visits were roughly 5-minute snapshot observations of 54 classrooms across seven schools throughout the district educating students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. It is understood that this type of observation shows only general trends in the type of structures, instructional practices, and support strategies routinely being utilized across the district. This report takes these limitations into account by triangulating the data with interviews and focus groups with faculty, staff, and administrators, and reviewing existing data.
- Focus groups with teachers and administrators
- Review of special education teachers' schedules and programmatic information
- On-site data-gathering conversations during visits with faculty, staff, students, and administrators
- Review of relevant documents provided by the district

The purpose of this summary is to highlight both areas of strength and priority areas for growth, with a focus on coherence, access, and outcomes for students with disabilities and other diverse learners. For specific data related to the key findings and recommendations, readers are directed to the full report.

Overall, the findings reflect a district with a clear commitment to inclusive practices and a foundation of strong structures, including a continuum of services, relatively strong early-grade performance compared to peer districts, and generally positive perceptions of school climate. At the same time, the data reveals variability in implementation, gaps between structures and instructional impact, and challenges in sustaining progress across grade levels. These patterns point to opportunities to strengthen alignment, clarify expectations, and more effectively leverage existing resources to ensure that all students experience meaningful access to rigorous instruction and consistent, high-quality support across the system.

KEY FINDINGS: AREAS OF STRENGTH

Strength 1: There is a strong commitment to inclusive special education practices.

Malden Public Schools demonstrates a clear and sustained commitment to inclusive education across the district. Placement data indicates that 73.8% of students with disabilities are educated in general education settings for 80% or more of the school day, exceeding the Massachusetts state target for full inclusion. This reflects not only compliance with state expectations, but a broader system-level prioritization of inclusive practices.

Strength 2: Foundational instructional structures are consistently in place across classrooms.

Snapshot observations across 54 classrooms indicate that core instructional structures are consistently established across Malden Public Schools. Classrooms were generally organized, routines were evident, and transitions appeared predictable, suggesting that students benefit from stable learning environments. This level of consistency is particularly important in a district serving a high-needs population, as it provides a foundation for access, engagement, and behavioral regulation. This consistency suggests that the district has successfully established common expectations for classroom functioning, which creates a strong foundation for scaling more advanced inclusive and differentiated practices over time.

Strength 3: Positive student-staff interactions and a culture of care are evident.

A culture of care is evident, and particularly significant given the needs of the student population. With a large percentage of students identified as high needs, including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and students from low-income backgrounds, strong relationships serve as a critical foundation for engagement, regulation, and access to learning. This relational strength is reinforced by multiple data sources, including snapshot observations, focus groups, staff survey data, and caregiver survey data.

Strength 4: Strong systems for service delivery and procedural compliance are in place across the district.

Across multiple data sources, the district demonstrates a high level of consistency in implementing special education services as outlined in student IEPs. While isolated gaps were identified at the secondary level, the overall pattern across the district reflects strong systems-level organization and accountability. This level of procedural reliability is a critical strength. In a system serving a high-needs population, this degree of consistency provides a stable foundation upon which more complex improvements in instructional practice can be built.

Strength 5: There is a strong foundation of collaboration and shared responsibility among staff.

Across focus groups and survey data, staff consistently described a culture of collaboration and shared ownership for student success. Educators across roles—including general education, special education, and support staff—expressed a willingness to work together to support students and problem-solve challenges. Structures such as PD Block time, access to specialized staff (e.g., BCBAs, RBTs), and informal collaboration practices were identified as supports that contribute to this culture. Administrators were also described as approachable and supportive, further reinforcing collaborative relationships across schools.

Strength 6: Staffing data reflects an investment in special education personnel at the school level.

The staffing data reflect a district that has made a substantial and sustained investment in special education personnel, while also demonstrating notable variability in how those resources are distributed across schools and program types. Malden serves approximately 1,202 students with disabilities with 184 special educators and 147 paraprofessionals, resulting in relatively low student-to-teacher ratios and strong overall staffing capacity. Academic support staffing remains the most stable and consistently prioritized category over time (44–46 positions), indicating a continued emphasis on inclusion-based support. When compared to peer districts, Malden’s staffing is very slightly higher, but commensurate to the peer districts. At the same time, focus group and survey themes reveal that staffing is an area that requires additional insight.

KEY FINDINGS: AREAS OF GROWTH

Growth Area 1: Variability in instructional practices may be limiting the academic outcomes typically associated with inclusive placement for students with disabilities.

A central theme across all sections of the report is the distinction between structural strength and instructional coherence. The district has established many of the foundational components of a functioning special education system. This is evident in strong procedural compliance and service delivery systems. Across most schools, services outlined in IEPs are delivered at a rate of 100%, indicating that systems for scheduling, staffing, and tracking service provision are largely functioning as intended. Additionally, 73.8% of students are educated in full inclusion settings, exceeding the state target, further reinforcing a system-level commitment to inclusion.

However, this structural strength is not consistently translating into high-quality instructional practices across classrooms. While classrooms are orderly, predictable, and relationally strong, instructional practices do not consistently reflect the level of differentiation, scaffolding, or access required for meaningful inclusion. Achievement data points to a gap between access and learning—students are present in general education environments, but are not consistently

receiving the level of instructional support necessary to engage with and master grade-level content.

Growth Area 2: Students with more complex needs would benefit from greater access to the general education curriculum.

While fully inclusive placements are largely present, this phenomenon coexists with a parallel system that relies heavily on more restrictive placements for certain groups of students. Districtwide, 73.8% of students are educated in full inclusion settings, meeting the state target; however, 20.9% of students are educated in substantially separate settings, exceeding the Massachusetts threshold of 13.32%. This indicates that, although inclusion is the dominant model, a significant portion of students are being served in more restrictive environments at rates higher than expected.

This pattern is further reinforced when examining placement by disability category. Students with communication impairments, specific learning disabilities, and health impairments are overwhelmingly educated in inclusive settings (over 90% in full inclusion), while students with autism and intellectual disabilities are much more likely to be placed in substantially separate settings, with over half of students with autism (53.6%) in restrictive environments. This indicates that the district's continuum may not yet be fully equipped to support students with more complex needs within inclusive environments.

Growth Area 3: There is a need to clearly define the MTSS process and expand targeted interventions prior to placing students in substantially separate environments.

Based on the survey analysis and triangulated with focus group feedback in the report, stakeholder perceptions of the MTSS process in Malden reflect a system that is present and valued in concept, but inconsistently understood and implemented in practice. Staff responses indicate that there is general awareness of MTSS as a framework for supporting students, however, there is less consistency in how it functions across schools. Educators reported varying levels of clarity around how students move through tiers of support, what specific interventions are available at each tier, and how decisions are made regarding intensifying or changing supports. This suggests that while MTSS exists structurally, it is not yet operating as a fully coherent, districtwide system.

Survey and focus group data indicate that while MTSS structures (e.g., intervention blocks) are in place, their implementation is inconsistent and often lacks a targeted, data-driven focus, functioning more as general academic support than as structured, evidence-based intervention aligned to specific student needs. Staff report uncertainty around core MTSS processes—including intervention selection, progress monitoring, and connections to special education decision-making—resulting in variability across schools and a lack of shared understanding. This inconsistency appears to contribute to a broader pattern in which placement decisions default to a binary model of full inclusion or substantially separate settings, with

limited use of partial inclusion or flexible, tiered supports. As a result, students may be moved more quickly to restrictive placements rather than receiving intensified, well-defined interventions within general education. Strengthening the clarity, consistency, and instructional rigor of MTSS implementation is therefore critical to improving alignment between student needs, intervention practices, and placement decisions.

Growth Area 4: Instructional practices observed across classrooms are largely consistent in structure but limited in rigor, differentiation, and student engagement.

Snapshot observations across 54 classrooms indicate that while instructional environments are generally orderly and consistent in structure, teaching practices rely heavily on teacher-directed, whole-group instruction with limited differentiation, flexible grouping, or targeted scaffolding. Students are frequently engaged in the same tasks regardless of readiness level, suggesting that access to grade-level content is not meaningfully supported for all learners. Opportunities for higher-order thinking, discourse, and active engagement are also limited, indicating that while foundational structures are in place, instructional rigor and responsiveness to student variability remain inconsistent.

These findings are reinforced by survey and focus group data, which highlight a gap between awareness and implementation. Educators consistently acknowledge the importance of differentiation but report difficulty embedding it into daily practice, often relying on special education staff for support and expressing uncertainty in adapting instruction independently. While staff report general confidence in supporting diverse learners, this confidence decreases when applied to specific practices such as differentiation, scaffolding, and co-teaching. Co-teaching, when present, often functions as support rather than an integrated instructional model. Educators also identify time constraints, pacing pressures, and competing demands as barriers, alongside a clear need for sustained professional learning to strengthen instructional expertise.

Growth Area 5: The presence of additional adults (co-teachers, paraprofessionals) in general education settings does not consistently translate into increased instructional access or differentiation.

Observation data indicates that while additional adults—such as special education teachers and paraprofessionals—are frequently present in general education classrooms, their presence does not consistently translate into increased instructional access, differentiation, or targeted intervention. Instead, these staff members often function in supportive roles, assisting individual students or managing behavior rather than engaging as instructional partners. As a result, co-teaching frequently operates as “one teach, one assist” rather than as a fully integrated model involving co-planning, shared instruction, and intentional scaffolding aligned to student needs.

Focus group and survey data reinforce this pattern, highlighting a lack of clarity around roles, limited common planning time, and insufficient training as key barriers to effective

implementation. Educators report a shared commitment to inclusive practices but express uncertainty in how to effectively share instructional responsibility, particularly in co-taught settings. This is further reflected in caregiver responses, where a notable proportion of families are unsure whether their child participates in co-teaching or how services are delivered. Taken together, the data suggests a gap between staffing structures and instructional impact, with opportunities to strengthen role clarity, collaboration, and professional learning to more fully leverage co-teaching and push-in support.

Growth Area 6: More clearly defined and consistently implemented districtwide practices and programs are needed to strengthen alignment, coherence, and communication across schools and stakeholder groups.

A consistent finding across the data is variability in how district programs, practices, and expectations are implemented across schools, resulting in uneven experiences for students and staff. While a continuum of services exists, there is not always a shared understanding of how those services should be delivered or how decisions should be made. This inconsistency is reinforced by limited opportunities for cross-school collaboration, with administrators and staff expressing a need for more structured time to align practices and problem-solve across buildings. Placement patterns further reflect this lack of coherence, particularly in the limited use of partial inclusion, suggesting that teams may not consistently apply flexible, tiered supports before moving to more restrictive settings. Additionally, identification patterns—especially the equal representation of English learners in the communication impairment category—raise concerns about consistency in evaluation practices and the potential for misidentification.

This lack of alignment extends to core instructional models and communication systems. Co-teaching and push-in support lack clearly defined, districtwide expectations, resulting in inconsistent implementation and a continued reliance on less integrated models. Broader communication challenges further contribute to fragmentation, with staff and caregivers reporting variability in how information is shared and decisions are communicated. While collaboration within schools is evident, there are fewer systems ensuring coherence across schools and stakeholder groups. Strengthening districtwide clarity around program models, instructional practices, and service delivery—paired with intentional structures for collaboration and communication—will be essential to improving consistency, trust, and overall system effectiveness.

Growth Area 7: While special education teacher staffing is commensurate with peer districts, a deeper analysis of how resources are allocated is needed.

While Malden's overall special education teacher staffing is comparable to peer districts in terms of student-to-teacher ratios, the data suggests that recent changes reflect internal redistribution rather than strategic growth or alignment. Fluctuations in substantially separate staffing across schools indicate shifting program locations rather than a consistent service delivery model. At the same time, staff perceptions of insufficient support—despite adequate staffing levels—point

to a misalignment between how resources are allocated and how student needs are met. This suggests that the core issue is not staffing quantity, but how personnel are deployed across service models to support inclusive and effective instruction.

Concerns also extend to administrative capacity, where a relatively small central team is responsible for overseeing a broad and complex set of functions, including special education, related services, compliance, and student services. This structure may limit the district's ability to focus on instructional leadership, program development, and system coherence, as administrative roles are likely pulled toward compliance demands. As a whole, the data indicates a need to more closely examine both instructional and administrative resource allocation to ensure that staffing structures are strategically aligned to support consistent, high-quality service delivery and system-wide improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation A: Establish a coherent, multi-year professional learning system to strengthen instructional practices that support inclusive education across Malden Public Schools.

To ensure that the district's strong commitment to inclusion translates into consistent, high-quality instructional practice, Malden should implement a structured, job-embedded professional learning plan focused on building staff capacity in universal design for learning (UDL), differentiation, accommodations and modifications, co-teaching, and flexible service delivery models. This professional learning should move beyond isolated workshops and instead function as an integrated system aligned to classroom practice, coaching, and ongoing collaboration.

Recommendation B: Refine the MTSS process to expand the use of targeted interventions and graduated supports, and to reduce the reliance on substantially separate programs.

Current data indicates that while the MTSS framework exists in Malden, it is not yet functioning as a coherent, consistently implemented system across schools. Survey and focus group findings show variability in how staff understand and apply MTSS, including unclear decision-making processes, inconsistent use of interventions, and limited alignment between tiers of support. Intervention structures such as WIN time are in place but are not consistently used in a targeted, data-driven manner. This inconsistency contributes to a pattern in which placement decisions tend to default to either full inclusion or substantially separate programs, with very limited use of partial inclusion or graduated supports. Placement data further reinforces this, showing that partial inclusion remains in the single digits across disability categories. Together, these findings suggest that without a more clearly defined and consistently implemented MTSS process, the district is not fully leveraging targeted interventions within general education to meet student

needs, resulting in an overreliance on more restrictive placements rather than flexible, responsive supports aligned with the principle of least restrictive environment.

Recommendation C: Review the placement of students with low-incidence disabilities in more restrictive placements and determine what supports are necessary to provide greater access to general education.

Students with low incidence disabilities are frequently served in more restrictive and out-of-district settings. At the same time, placement patterns across the district reflect a broader reliance on a binary model, with most students either fully included or placed in substantially separate programs, and very limited use of partial inclusion or flexible supports. Focus group and observational data further suggest that targeted interventions and inclusive supports are not consistently implemented prior to more restrictive placements, and that co-teaching and push-in models are not always used as instructional tools to increase access. A more intentional review process would allow the district to identify what instructional, behavioral, and structural supports are needed to serve more students within general education settings, strengthen in-district capacity, and ensure alignment with the principle of least restrictive environment.

Recommendation D: Strengthen communication, clarity, and transparency across Malden Public Schools by establishing consistent districtwide processes, clearly defined program information, and aligned communication practices so that staff, families, and administrators share a common understanding of services, supports, and decision-making structures.

Strengthening communication, clarity, and transparency across Malden Public Schools is necessary due to variability in how services, programs, and decision-making processes are understood and implemented across schools. Stakeholders described differences in how information is communicated, how placement and service decisions are made, and how consistently processes are followed, leading to varied experiences for students and families depending on the school. Administrators also expressed a need for more structured opportunities to collaborate and align practices across buildings, suggesting that communication systems are not yet fully supporting coherence at the district level. Additionally, inconsistencies in program implementation, co-teaching models, and MTSS practices point to a lack of shared understanding of key structures and expectations. Without clear, accessible, and consistently applied communication systems, even strong programs and practices can be experienced unevenly. Strengthening these systems will be critical to ensuring alignment across schools, improving transparency with families, and building trust and consistency throughout the district.

KEY DATA SOURCES:

DEMOGRAPHICS

Malden Public Schools serves a complex and high-need student population, with 20.5% of students identified for special education, 29.5% identified as English learners, and 74.8% classified as high needs. Within the special education population, a small number of disability categories account for the majority of students, led by autism (22.9%), specific learning disabilities (17.9%), and communication impairments (16.6%). Compared to state and national patterns, the district shows a notably higher concentration of autism and a lower proportion of specific learning disabilities, suggesting a distinct identification profile. In early childhood, developmental delay, communication impairments, and autism dominate, while in later grades, identification shifts toward learning disabilities and health impairments.

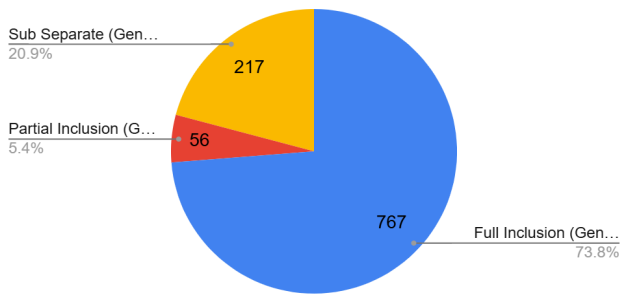
Programmatic structure plays a significant role in shaping how disability categories are distributed across schools. Variability across buildings is closely tied to the intentional clustering of specialized programs, with autism more concentrated in schools housing intensive learning programs and communication needs more prominent in sites with specialized language-based supports. Service intensity also varies meaningfully by disability category, with autism most strongly associated with high-intensity supports, while learning disabilities, health impairments, and communication needs are more often served through moderate or lower-intensity models.

Out-of-district placement patterns reinforce these trends while also highlighting potential system constraints. At 7.6% of the special education population, Malden exceeds the state target for external placements, with autism and emotional disabilities disproportionately represented. Autism accounts for approximately 41% of out-of-district placements, and emotional disabilities represent nearly 24%, both at rates significantly higher than their in-district representation. In contrast, categories such as communication impairments and specific learning disabilities—while prevalent within district programs—rarely result in external placement, suggesting stronger internal capacity to serve these students.

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Malden Public Schools demonstrates a mixed profile with respect to Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) implementation, meeting state targets for full inclusion while exceeding targets for substantially separate placements. Specifically, 73.8% of students with disabilities are educated in full inclusion settings, surpassing the state benchmark of 65.49%. However, 20.9% of students are placed in substantially separate environments, exceeding the state threshold of 13.32%. This dual pattern indicates that while inclusive practices are broadly implemented, a significant portion of students continue to be served in more restrictive settings at rates above state expectations.

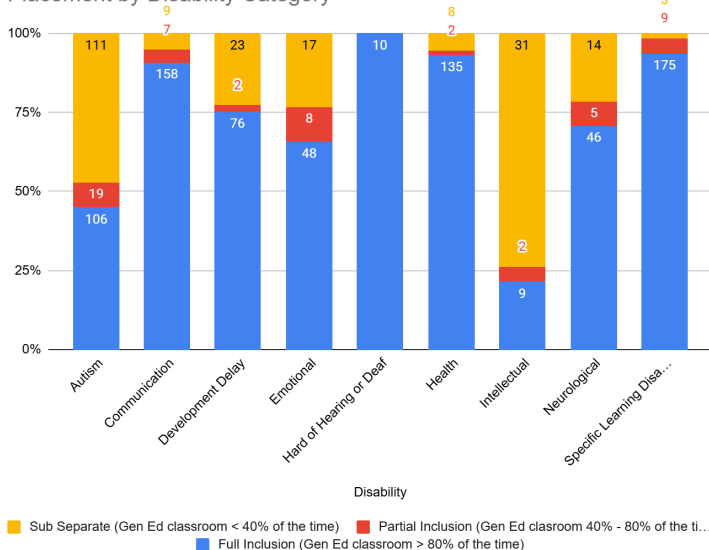
K-12 In-District Students by Educational Environment



Variation across schools is largely explained by programmatic design. Schools with specialized programs for students with more intensive needs—particularly autism and developmental disabilities—show higher rates of substantially separate placements, while others demonstrate stronger inclusion profiles. Across all schools, partial inclusion remains notably underutilized, suggesting that placement decisions tend to default to either full inclusion or substantially separate environments rather than leveraging more flexible, intermediate supports.

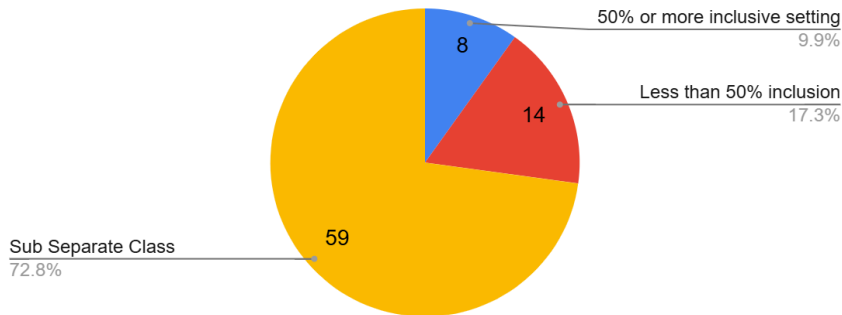
Placement patterns by disability category reveal a clear divergence in how students access inclusive settings. Students with communication impairments, specific learning disabilities, and health impairments are overwhelmingly served in full inclusion environments, often exceeding 90%. In contrast, students with autism and intellectual disabilities are much more likely to be placed in substantially separate settings, with over half of students with autism and nearly three-quarters of students with intellectual disabilities served in more restrictive environments. Students with emotional and neurological disabilities fall between these extremes, reflecting more varied placement patterns. These differences underscore that placement is strongly influenced by disability category, with some groups consistently experiencing more restrictive educational environments.

Placement by Disability Category



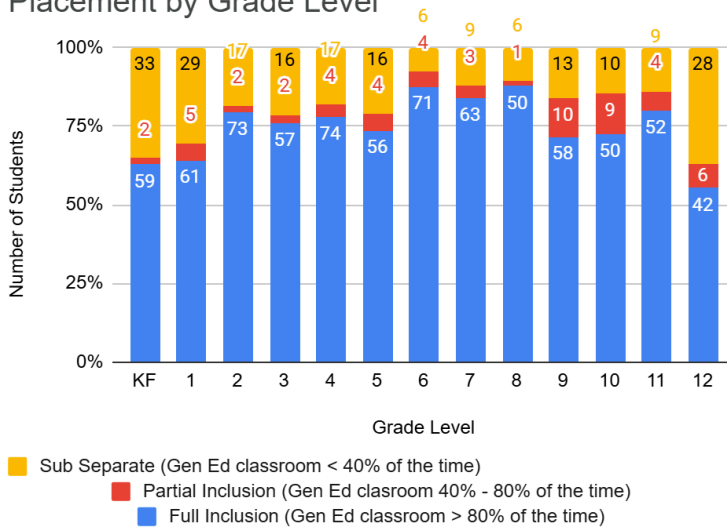
When examined across grade levels, a distinct trajectory emerges. Placement begins with relatively high levels of restrictiveness in early childhood and the early elementary years, where substantially separate placements are common, particularly for students receiving more intensive services.

PK Students Receiving 10 or More Hours of Service By Educational Environment



Inclusion increases steadily through elementary school and peaks in the middle grades, where full inclusion rates exceed 80% and substantially separate placements reach their lowest levels. However, this trend reverses in high school, where inclusion declines and substantially separate placements increase significantly, particularly by grade 12. Across all grades, partial inclusion remains consistently low, reinforcing a system-wide pattern in which placement decisions cluster at the extremes rather than utilizing a more balanced continuum of supports. Taken together, these patterns suggest a structural model in which early placement decisions, program availability, and service intensity collectively shape students' long-term access to inclusive educational environments.

Placement by Grade Level



2025 MCAS RESULTS

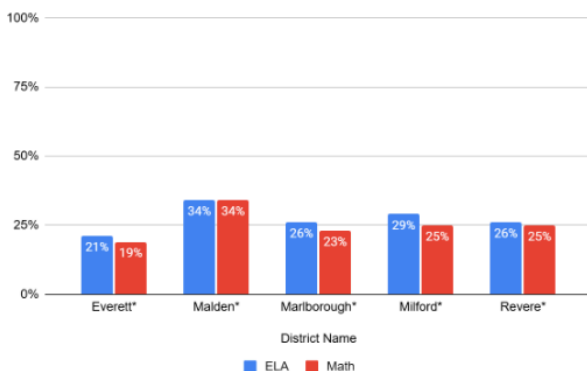
Across 2025 MCAS results, there is a substantial achievement gap between nondisabled students and students with disabilities (SWD) at every grade level. Nondisabled students perform within a relatively stable range (38%–54% in math and 30%–48% in ELA), while SWD performance remains significantly lower (1%–14% in math and 0%–11% in ELA), indicating that the gap is systemic rather than subject-specific. The disparity is most pronounced in the middle grades, where gaps reach 44–51 percentage points in math and peak at 46 points in ELA, including a complete absence of SWD meeting expectations in grade 7 ELA. In both subjects, SWD performance declines sharply from grades 6 through 8, suggesting that increasing academic complexity disproportionately impacts this group.

This pattern is reinforced by the distribution of students across performance levels. SWD are heavily concentrated in the “not meeting expectations” category (45%–69% in math and 51%–70% in ELA), while nondisabled students are more evenly distributed. Although nondisabled students perform slightly higher and more consistently in math at the upper end, SWD outcomes are similarly low across both subjects. ELA shows a sharper drop in grade 7, while math reflects a more gradual middle school decline, but both result in comparable gaps.

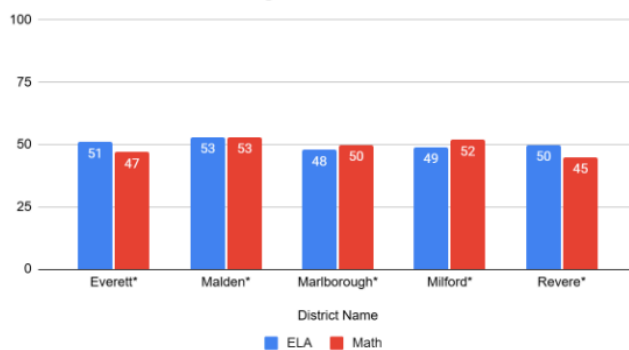
To determine Malden’s performance relative to peer districts, the following districts were selected due to similarity in size and student demographics: Everett, Marlborough, Milford, and Revere.

Across a single year of MCAS data, Malden demonstrates relatively strong performance among comparable districts in grades 3–8, particularly when viewed against similar demographic contexts. With 34% of students meeting or exceeding expectations in both ELA and math, Malden performs at or near the top of its peer group and shows strong student growth. However, this relative strength exists within a broader pattern of low absolute performance, as only about one-third of students are meeting expectations. At the high school level, while Grade 10 performance for all students remains comparable to some peers, Malden falls below higher-performing comparison districts and shows a marked decline in growth.

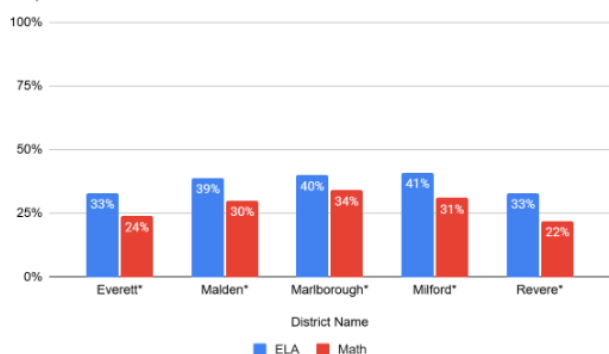
Percentage of Students in Grades 3-8 Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on MCAS



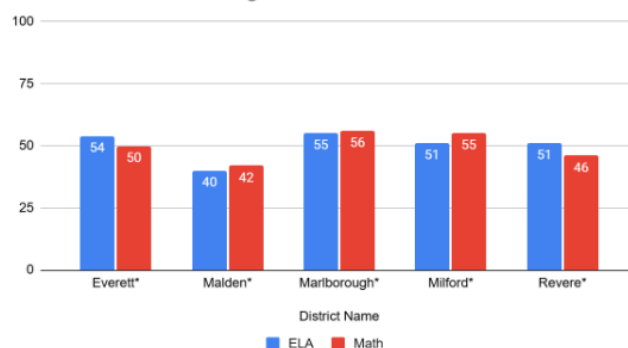
Grades 3-8 Growth Average on 2025 MCAS



Percentage of Students in Grade 10 Meeting or Exceeding Expectations on MCAS



Grade 10 Growth Average on 2025 MCAS

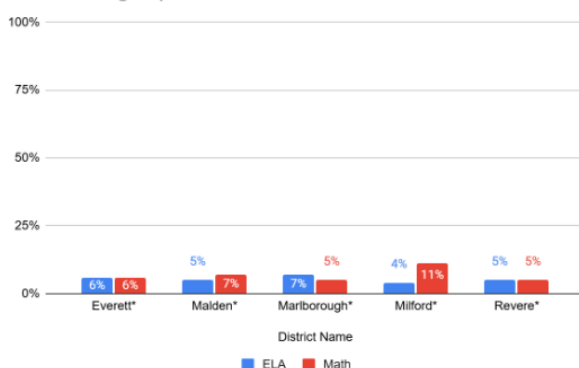


When considering the performance of students with disabilities at the Grades 3–8 level, performance is uniformly low across all comparison districts, and Malden is not an exception. Approximately 5% of students with disabilities in Malden are meeting or exceeding expectations in ELA and 7% in Math, placing it in the middle of the comparison group—slightly below Everett in ELA (6%), below Marlborough in ELA (7%), and notably below Milford in Math (11%), while roughly comparable to Revere.

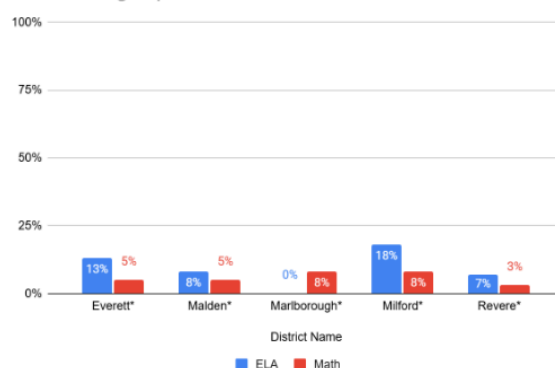
These findings for students with disabilities in Grades 3-8 contrast with the earlier finding that Malden performs relatively well overall in Grades 3–8 when viewed alongside comparison districts. While the general student population shows comparatively stronger outcomes and growth, students with disabilities are not experiencing that same relative success. In other words, Malden’s early-grade “strength” among comparison districts is not equitably distributed for students with disabilities.

At Grade 10, the pattern becomes more pronounced. Malden reports 8% proficiency for students with disabilities in ELA and 5% in Math. While this is comparable to some comparison districts, it falls significantly below Milford (18% ELA) and below Everett (13% ELA) (visual comparison). When this is interpreted alongside the previously identified decline in Grade 10 growth for all students, the secondary system in Malden may not be effectively accelerating learning for students with disabilities as compared to the earlier grades in the district.

Percentage of Students with Disabilities in Grades 3-8 Meeting or Exceeding Expectations



Percentage of Students with Disabilities in Grade 10 Meeting or Exceeding Expectations



COMPLIANCE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION REGULATIONS

The Malden Public Schools Special Education Policies and Procedures Manual is a comprehensive internal guidance document intended to standardize special education practices across the district. It is explicitly designed to align with federal law (IDEA) and Massachusetts regulations under 603 CMR 28.00, and it organizes procedures across the full special education lifecycle, including referral, evaluation, eligibility determination, IEP development, placement, and implementation. Overall, the manual reflects a solid procedural foundation and demonstrates clear intent to align with Massachusetts special education regulations. Its strengths lie in its thorough coverage of required processes and timelines. Its primary areas for growth relate to ensuring that procedures consistently translate into high-quality, individualized, and substantively appropriate educational programming, with stronger emphasis on meaningful access, ambitious outcomes, and authentic team-based decision-making.

As part of this review, data was provided on the types of services provided as specified in service delivery grids on student IEPs over a two-week period. The district then provided information on the implementation of those services in practice. For this point-in-time data, alignment between IEP services and implementation of academic special education services is reflected across the majority of schools. If a service was missed due to a staff absence, but families were notified and the service was rescheduled, this was found to be in compliance. A pattern of full implementation is consistently observed across all school sites, where every special education academic support service category reflects 100% delivery fidelity. Some variation was noted in related services, with services being missed at Malden High School. With the exception of related services at Malden High School, there is strong evidence of procedural adherence in most contexts, specifically regarding the requirement under 603 CMR 28.06(7) that school districts implement IEPs without delay and deliver all services as specified. The widespread 100% service delivery rates across multiple schools suggest that the district has established effective systems for ensuring implementation fidelity in most settings.

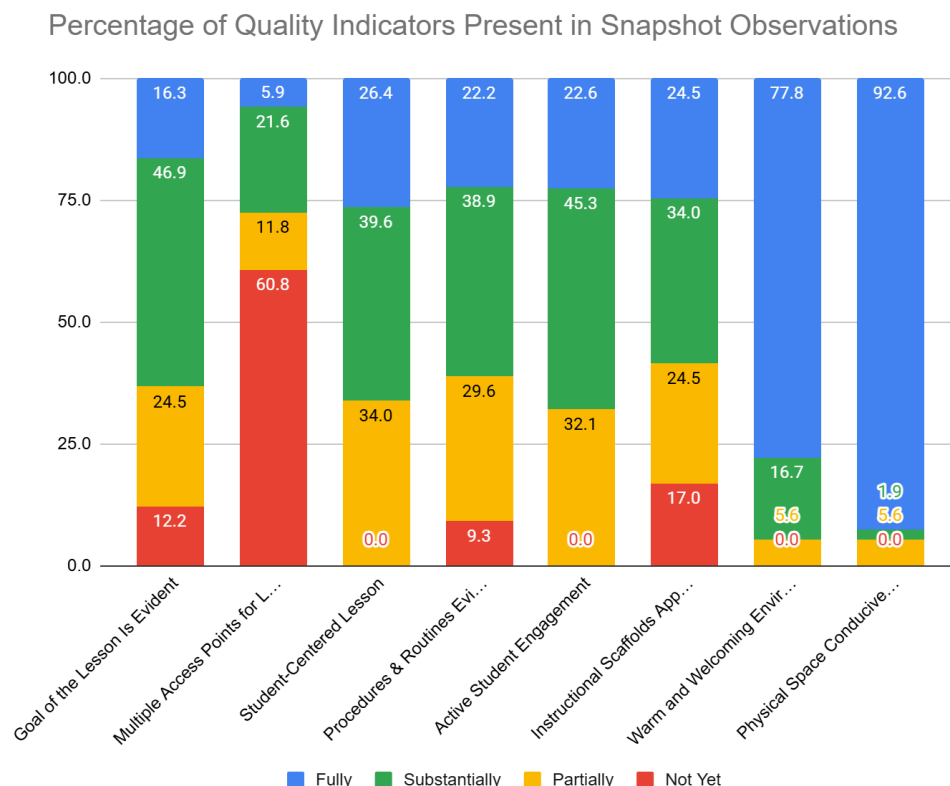
SNAPSHOT OBSERVATIONS

On March 4, 5, and 6, 2026, an observer from Empower ED visited 54 classrooms across Malden Public Schools to conduct “snapshot observations.” During the walkthroughs, a common electronic form was used to determine the extent to which quality indicators of inclusive education were present.

The data suggests that structural and environmental components of classrooms—such as physical setup and classroom climate—are strong and consistently implemented. However, the deeper instructional shifts required for inclusive education—particularly providing multiple access points, embedding scaffolds, and ensuring student-centered learning—are less consistently present.

The findings suggest that while classrooms are well-prepared environments, they are not yet consistently designed to meet the full range of learner variability. The most critical area for improvement lies in moving from well-managed classrooms to intentionally inclusive

instructional design, where multiple pathways to learning and demonstration are embedded as standard practice rather than exception.



When comparing overall practices to special education classrooms, differences were apparent. Special education classrooms tend to demonstrate stronger implementation of practices directly tied to differentiation and support, such as scaffolding and multiple access points, though these are still inconsistently applied. General education classrooms, by contrast, show stronger performance in areas related to overall instructional structure and student engagement, but significant gaps in differentiation and access. Across both settings, environmental factors are strong, while deeper instructional practices—particularly those central to inclusive education—remain uneven. While both environments have foundational strengths, data suggests that neither setting has fully operationalized the core instructional shifts necessary to consistently meet the needs of diverse learners. These conclusions are drawn based upon moment in time data and must be interpreted with caution.

Special education settings were additionally assessed with another rubric, specific to special education classrooms. Across all domains of that rubric, a consistent theme emerges. Practices associated with classroom management, engagement monitoring, and general instructional flow are more frequently implemented in special education classrooms, often at moderate to high levels. In contrast, components of explicit instruction—clear goal-setting, modeling, purposeful

guided practice, strategic scaffolding, and precise feedback—are most often only partially implemented or absent in these settings.

FOCUS GROUPS

A review of the focus group data across Non-Special Education Staff, Special Education Staff, Administrators, and Caregivers reveals several key trends regarding the strengths and needs of special education service delivery and inclusive education in Malden.

Key Trends in Strengths in Special Education Service Delivery and Inclusive Education

The most frequently cited strengths centered on the dedication of personnel and the availability of specialized resources:

- Dedicated and Highly Professional Staff: Across all stakeholder groups, the commitment, quality, and professionalism of many special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators were identified as key assets. Participants noted a strong culture of care, a shared sense of responsibility for all students, and a willingness to go above and beyond. Paraprofessionals, in particular, were consistently described by families as compassionate and highly supportive.
- Specialized Resources and Program Continuum: The district is viewed as comparatively well-resourced with specialized roles like BCBAs, RBTs, and school psychologists, which supports student interventions. Furthermore, the development of additional in-district programs is seen as a strength to support students within their home community.
- Culture of Collaboration and Support: A culture of professional collaboration and mutual support is evident, especially among special education staff and in supporting students with behavioral needs. Administrators were frequently described as approachable, supportive, and promoting shared responsibility, while Professional Learning Community (PD Block) time was highlighted as a valuable structure for collaboration.

Key Trends in Challenges and Areas for Growth

Consistently recurring themes for growth revolved around consistency, capacity, and clarity in programming and practice:

- Program Definition and Consistency: There is a pervasive need for greater clarity and consistency in program structures and service delivery. Specifically, stakeholders noted a gap in options for students requiring a moderate level of support—those beyond full inclusion but not needing substantially separate programming. Substantially separate programs were noted as variable in structure, and there is a desire for more proactive,

long-term planning to ensure optimal program fit rather than reactive placements based on available space.

- Staffing Capacity and Service Continuity: Staffing stability and capacity were identified as ongoing challenges across all groups. High turnover and vacancies, particularly among paraprofessionals, related service providers, and program managers, impact the continuity and equitable access to specialized services. High caseloads, especially for related service providers, were also noted as a limiting factor for collaboration.
- Need for Consistent Inclusive Practices and Professional Learning: All staff and administrators expressed a strong need for greater clarity, shared understanding, and consistent implementation of inclusive practices. Specifically, co-teaching models are used inconsistently with undefined expectations. There is a high desire for expanded, sustained, and targeted professional development, including instructional coaching in special education, to build capacity in areas like differentiation, co-teaching, and IEP implementation.
- IEP Process, Compliance, and Transparency: Caregivers reported variability in experiences, noting concerns related to IEP implementation, follow-through, and adherence to timelines and procedures. Families and staff alike expressed a need for greater transparency, clarity, and more consistently collaborative experiences in IEP meetings. Non-special education staff also need earlier access to IEP information for effective planning.
- Systemic Clarity and Alignment: Challenges exist in ensuring clarity and consistency in non-special education processes, such as the SST/pre-referral processes. Staff also noted challenges related to alignment across grade levels, particularly in transitions from K–8 to high school programming.

SURVEY DATA

In addition to focus groups conducted with employees of Malden Public Schools, all staff members were invited to participate in a confidential survey to share their feedback. The survey link was distributed to personnel across the district, resulting in 163 responses representing a range of roles and positions within the organization. The greatest participation was from Malden High School, comprising 23.9% of participants. In descending order based on survey response, the remaining participants were from: Salemwood School (17.2%), Beebe School (14.1%), Linden STEAM Academy (11.7%), Forrestdale School (11%), Ferryway School and Early Learning Center (10.4% each) and District Office (<1%).

Survey data from both staff and caregivers reflects a system with a strong foundational commitment to inclusion, but with gaps in consistency, implementation, and capacity. Staff responses indicate generally positive perceptions of inclusive practices, particularly in areas such as classroom environment and student-centered instruction, where reported implementation aligns closely with observations. However, significant discrepancies emerge in more complex instructional practices—most notably the use of scaffolds and multiple access points—where over 80% of staff report frequent use, but fewer than 30% of snapshot classroom observations demonstrate strong implementation. This suggests a gap between perceived and actual practice, though results must be interpreted with caution due to limitations associated with snapshot observations.

With regards to co-teaching, many educators report familiarity with co-teaching but implementation is heavily skewed toward the “One Teach, One Assist” model, with limited use of more collaborative approaches. This was consistent with snapshot observations. Structural barriers are evident, including limited common planning time (41% report none) and lack of recent training (64.1%), alongside broader concerns about staffing shortages and caseloads.

Staff also report moderate preparedness in delivering interventions and supporting diverse learners, but significantly lower confidence in addressing behavioral and mental health needs, and low perceived impact of district professional development—particularly in supporting social-emotional and academic needs.

To better understand family perspectives on special education services, an optional survey was shared with parents and caregivers of students with disabilities across the district. A total of 131 responses were received, representing voices from every school. The highest number of responses came from Beebe School (26 responses, 19.8%), followed by Linden STEAM Academy (24 responses, 18.3%), Malden High School (23 responses, 17.6%), and Forrestdale School (19 responses, 14.5%). Ferryway School and the Early Learning Center also had strong participation, with 14 and 12 responses, making up 10.7% and 9.2% of the total, respectively.

Caregiver responses reinforce both strengths and areas for growth. Families generally report positive experiences, particularly related to school climate, safety, and a sense of belonging, with approximately 64%–73% indicating favorable perceptions across indicators. However, concerns emerge around instructional clarity, access to appropriately leveled learning, and communication. A notable proportion of families report that students do not consistently understand the purpose of their learning or receive instruction at the right level. Additionally, nearly one-third of caregivers are unsure whether their child participates in co-teaching, indicating a lack of transparency in service delivery. While families largely view co-teaching positively when present, variability in communication and partnership—particularly around sharing input and understanding programming—suggests an opportunity to strengthen family engagement and system coherence.

STAFFING ANALYSIS

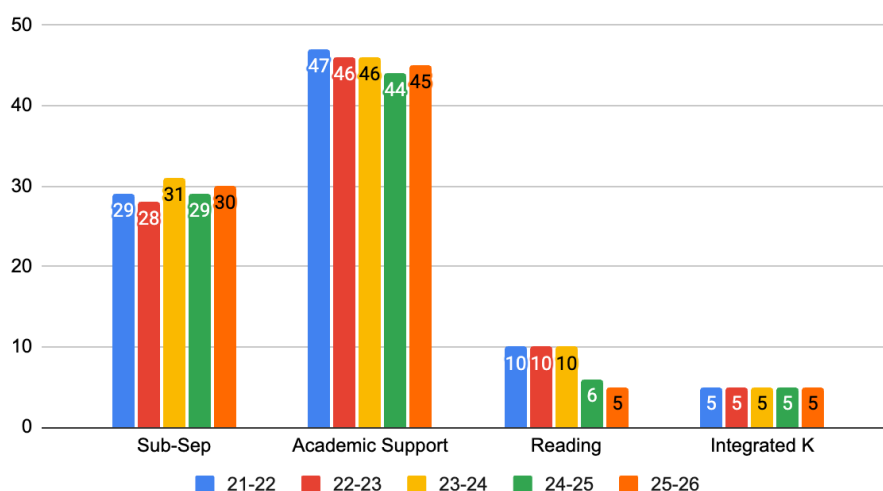
Data provided by the district indicates that there are a total of 184 special educators and 147 Education Support Professionals (ESPs) who provide instruction, services, and support for 1,202 students with disabilities in PK through grade 12.

The special education department consists of the following:

- Assistant Superintendent for Student Services/Director of Special Education
- Program Managers (3) - oversee in-district and out-of-district programming
- Team Chairpersons (9) - one per K-8 building, 2 for ELC, 2 for MHS
- Student Support Teachers (49)
- Integrated PK and K Teachers (15)
- Sub-Separate Teachers (43)
- Adaptive PE Teacher (1)
- School Psychologists (7) - one per K-8 building, .5 for ELC, 1.5 for MHS
- Adjustment Counselors (23)
- BCBAs (7)
- Speech-Language Pathologists (18) - 5 employed by the district, 13 are contracted services
- Occupational Therapists (7) - 1 employed by the district, 6 are contracted services
- Physical Therapists (3) - all 3 are contracted services

The subsequent chart illustrates total special education staffing across Malden by program type from 2021–22 through 2025–26, revealing distinct patterns in how staffing has shifted across service models over time. Overall, the data show that while total staffing levels across the district do not dramatically increase or decrease, there is significant internal redistribution. Academic support roles remain stable, reading positions generally decline, and substantially separate staffing shifts across buildings.

Total Staffing by Category of Program



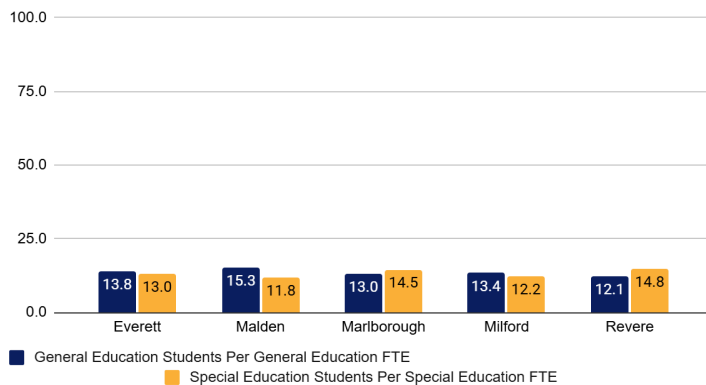
Publicly available data was used for staffing comparisons among peer districts. Data utilized is from the 2024-2025 school year and it excludes related service providers. To better understand factors such as student-teacher ratio, the student population was first classified as general education or special education, and then compared to the number of general education and special education Full-Time Equivalency (FTE) positions. It is understood that this type of analysis is limited because the majority of students with IEPs receive instruction at least partially in general education classes. However, this was used to better understand the FTEs per student populations.

While Malden's ratio of 15.3 general education students per general education teacher is the highest ratio among the peer comparison districts, it is a less than two student difference to the next highest districts (Everett - 13.8 and Milford - 13.4). Marlborough has 13.0 general education students per general education FTE and Revere has 12.1 general education students per general education FTE.

In contrast, for special education, Malden has 11.8 students per special education FTE, which is the lowest ratio among the districts. However, similar to the prior data, the difference is relatively low. Milford has only slightly more students per special education FTE at 12.2. The remaining special education students per special education teacher FTE are: Everett (13.0), Marlborough (14.5), and Revere (14.8). Comparatively, there are more special education students to special education teacher FTE in Marlborough and Revere as compared to Malden, Everett, and Milford.

	General Education FTE per Gen Ed Student	Special Education FTE per Special Ed Student
Everett	13.8	13.0
Malden	15.3	11.8
Marlborough	13.0	14.5
Milford	13.4	12.2
Revere	12.1	14.8

FTEs versus Student Population of Comparison Districts



A total of 147 Education Support Professionals (ESPs) are employed by the district for 1,202 students in early learning programs through grade 12. This reveals an overall paraprofessional to student ratio of roughly one paraprofessional for every eight students with disabilities.

When analyzing the paraprofessional ratio for school-aged students with disabilities only, there are a total of 112 paraprofessionals to 1,046 students with disabilities. The paraprofessional to students with disabilities ratio is one paraprofessional to 9.3 students. This indicates the ratio of paraprofessionals to school-aged students with disabilities is slightly higher than the overall ratio, at roughly one paraprofessional for every nine students with disabilities.

When analyzing the paraprofessional ratio for students with disabilities enrolled in early childhood programs only, there are a total of 30 paraprofessionals to 156 students with disabilities. The paraprofessional to students with disabilities ratio is one paraprofessional to 5.2 students. This indicates the ratio of paraprofessionals to early childhood students with disabilities is lower in early childhood settings than the overall ratio, at roughly one paraprofessional for every five students with disabilities.

