



LEADING WELL UNDER PRESSURE

2026 MASE Fall Leadership Conference

October 21-23, 2026 | Brainerd, Minnesota

The Superintendent–Special Education Director Partnership

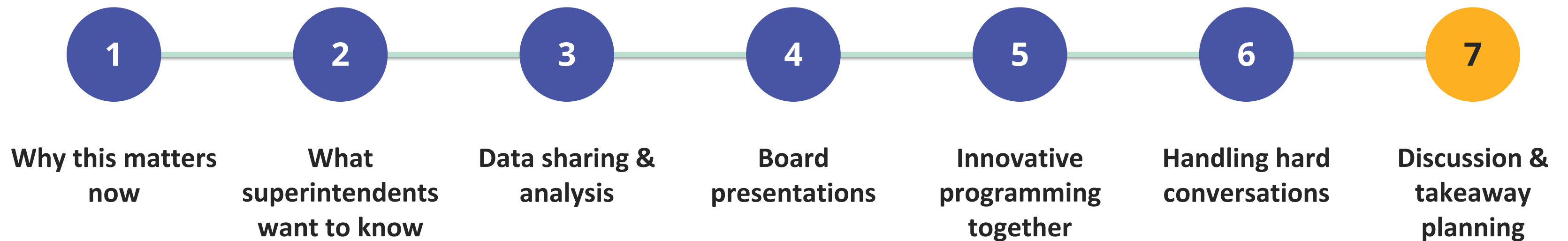
Leading Well Together Under Pressure

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Fridley Public Schools (ISD 14)



2026 MASE FALL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

Our Hour Together



Our promise: practical, candid strategies you can use Monday — whichever chair you sit in.



Why This Partnership Matters More Now Than Ever



Rising complexity of need

More students arrive with intensive behavioral, mental health, and medical needs.



Workforce strain

Persistent shortages of special educators, paraprofessionals, and related service providers.



Fiscal pressure

Special education costs keep outpacing revenue, and the gap lands on the general fund.



Higher stakes, more scrutiny

Complaints, due process, and public attention move fast — and reach the superintendent first.



Leading Well Under Pressure, From Both Seats

Superintendent's seat

Under pressure, I need...

Early warning

Clear options and a recommendation

Confidence the plan is legally and fiscally sound

Shared ground

Together, we hold...

Students at the center

No surprises — in either direction

One voice in public

Decisions grounded in data

Special education leader's seat

Under pressure, I need...

Access and air time

A partner who understands the “why”

Backing when decisions are hard



Turn & Talk



How intentional is the superintendent–special education partnership in your district right now?

1

Undefined

2

3

Situational

4

5

Intentional & well-built

With a neighbor, 3 minutes: What number did you pick? What would move it one point higher?



01

What Superintendents Want to Know

Framing information so it lands: timing, format, and the difference between data and a data story





What Superintendents Actually Need



No surprises

If it could reach the board, the press, or a courtroom, tell me first.



The “so what”

Not just what happened — what it means for students, staff, and the district.



Options, not only problems

Bring two or three paths forward, with your recommendation.



Fiscal and legal exposure

What does it cost, what's the risk — and what's the risk of doing nothing?



The human story

Who is affected, and how will families and staff experience this?



Anticipate it

Before every update, ask yourself:
“What will the superintendent be
asked next — and by whom?”



Match the Channel to the Urgency



Call now

Same day

Safety incidents or serious injury
Media inquiries
Legal threats



Heads-up

This week

Escalating family conflict
Staffing gaps affecting services
A new state or OCR complaint



Standing 1:1

On the agenda

Program updates
Trend data
Upcoming decisions & budget variances



Written brief

Planned

Board-bound items
Annual compliance results
Long-range planning

Agree on these categories in advance so no one has to guess under pressure.



Data vs. a Data Story

DATA



**“Out-of-district placements
rose from 14 to 19.”**



What

Five more students are being served outside the district this year.

So what

Each placement adds tuition and transportation cost — and takes a student away from their home community.

Now what

We recommend building in-district capacity. Here is the plan, the timeline, and the cost comparison.



02

Data Sharing and Analysis

Building a shared rhythm for reviewing special education data, and using it proactively rather than reactively





A Shared Data Rhythm



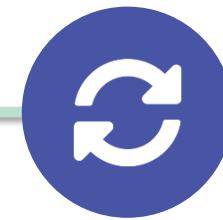
Weekly

Critical incidents, escalating cases, staffing gaps



Monthly

Evaluation timelines, caseloads, complaints, budget vs. actual



Quarterly

Placement trends, restraint and seclusion, program enrollment, outcome indicators



Annually

Child count, achievement and graduation, state compliance results, multi-year cost trends

Same data. Same calendar.



Watch the Leading Indicators Together

Proactive teams act on trends before they become crises.



Referrals & evaluations

Rising volume or slipping timelines



Out-of-district placements

New placements and the reasons behind them



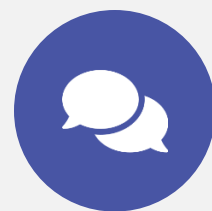
Restraint & seclusion

Patterns by site, student, or time of day



Staffing & caseloads

Vacancies and caseloads above targets



Family concerns

Complaints and conflicts clustering in one place



Budget variance

Costs drifting from the plan



03

Board Presentations

Translating complex special education work into clear, confident board communication





Tips for Special Education Board Updates

1

Lead with students

Open with who you serve and why it matters before any numbers.

2

One message

Decide the single thing the board should remember.

3

Lose the acronyms

IEP, FAPE, LRE, Setting IV — define it or drop it.

4

Show the cost of inaction

Pair every investment with what happens if we do nothing.

5

Rehearse and preview

Agree who answers which questions — and who closes.

6

No first-time surprises

Sensitive items reach board leadership before the public meeting.



Anatomy of a Board Update



Keep the presentation short and protect time for questions. The board's questions are where trust is built — and where your rehearsal pays off.

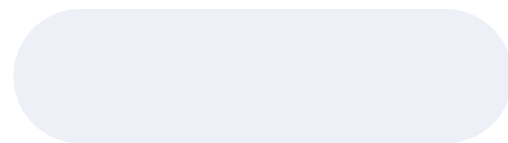


04

Innovative Programming Together

How joint ownership accelerates new initiatives

Fridley's Federal Setting IV programming, a working example





Co-Developing, Not Working Around Each Other



Working around each other

Programs proposed after budgets are set

Special education advocates alone at the cabinet table

Facilities, transportation, and HR brought in late

The board hears a cost, not a vision



Co-developing together

Need identified together from shared data

Superintendent co-owns the vision and the risk

Every cabinet department plans in parallel from day one

The board hears one aligned story about students



Working Example: Federal Setting IV at Fridley

Dignity Centered Programming — serving students with the most complex needs close to home



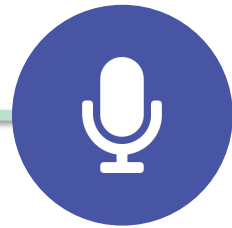
Name the need

Use data to show where students were being served — and at what cost



Shared vision

Agree that dignity and belonging drive every design choice



Bring the board along

Tell one aligned story about students, cost, and outcomes



Design for belonging

Belonging is a District core value for all students



Clear pathways

District-initiated and parent-initiated enrollment routes



Prepare the people

Ready program staff and general education teachers

Every step had both of us in it. That's what made it move.



What We Learned



Joint ownership shortens the runway

When the superintendent co-owns a program, decisions that might take a year can happen in a season.



Operations is programming

Facilities, transportation, nutrition, and staffing shape the student experience as much as instruction does.



Dignity has to be designed in

Location, enrollment, and staff readiness either communicate belonging — or quietly undermine it.



05

Handling Hard Conversations

A shared framework for approaching difficult conversations as partners, not adversaries





A Shared Framework: Before, During, After



Before

Align privately

Get the facts and legal parameters straight

Name the non-negotiables

Decide who leads and who supports



During

Lead together

Open with shared values and the student

Listen fully before responding

Never negotiate against each other in the room



After

Close the loop

Debrief within 24 hours

Follow through on every commitment

Acknowledge any strain between you



Different Rooms, Same Partnership



Staff

Be honest about constraints, and show what support is coming.



Families

Start with what we know and value about their child. Be clear about what we can and cannot do.



Board

Give context before conflict reaches them in public.



Each other

Disagree candidly in private. Stand together in public.



Agreements That Protect Trust

- ✓ No blindsiding — ever
- ✓ Disagree in private, align in public
- ✓ Ask before reacting
- ✓ Acknowledge when we get it wrong

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Trust is built in the calm moments and spent in the hard ones.

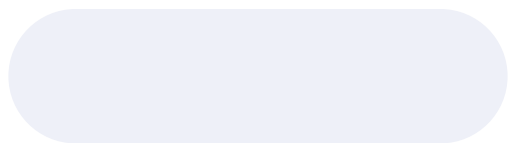
Make deposits often.



06

Closing: Discussion and Takeaway Planning

Apply what you heard to your own district — whichever chair you sit in





Let's Discuss



If you're a superintendent

What do you wish your special education leader brought to you sooner?



If you lead special education

What would change if your superintendent co-owned one of your priorities?



Everyone

Where does this partnership break down under pressure — and what's one fix?



Your Monday Morning Plan



One conversation I will have...



One data routine I will start...



One agreement I will propose...



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Thank You

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