



5 TIPS

for Containing Special Ed
Costs while Maximizing
Student Supports



When you truly care about your students and their success, you want to offer them the supports that they need at whatever cost. However, you also need to be mindful of your budget. Fortunately, Pediatric Therapeutic Services has proven that reducing special education costs and effectively supporting your students are not mutually exclusive.

By following just five simple practices, you can contain your special education costs, while also expanding and enhancing the quality of services you provide for students. Those practices are:

- 1 Understand the Benefits of a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Approach to Special Education**
- 2 Empower Teachers and Staff to Intervene at the General Education Level**
- 3 Practice Effective Group-Based Interventions to Keep Students off Caseload**
- 4 Collect Data to Effectively Allocate Resources**
- 5 Keep Therapy Schedules Consistent between In-Person and Remote Learning Formats**

1 Understand the Benefits of a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Approach to Special Education

By adopting a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) approach for your related services program, you're able to provide well-rounded support for students while also watching your budget. An MTSS approach is a highly scientific and data-driven approach to interventions that provides supports in three tiers:

- **Tier 1: Supports available to all students**
- **Tier 2: Targeted supports, such as short-term small groups and classroom-based strategies**
- **Tier 3: More intensive, individualized supports and interventions**

While an MTSS approach is most commonly used to serve students who may struggle with academic subjects, like reading or math, it can also be effectively applied to related services like occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech language pathology (SLP). In the long run, this kind of system:

- **Helps to keep therapist caseloads manageable by reducing unnecessary referrals**
- **Improves the overall quality of classroom-based supports**
- **Utilizes inclusive practices to support students in a least restrictive environment**
- **Reduces disproportionality from over-identification**

An MTSS approach can help contain special education costs by keeping students off caseload whose needs can be addressed through general education level interventions or in small groups.

With an MTSS approach to related services, you make sure that only the right students end up on caseload.



2 Empower Teachers and Staff to Intervene at the General Education Level

You know that many of your teachers want to be informed and active team members. However, many may not be properly trained in effective problem solving at the classroom level. This can result in students unnecessarily referred to related services due to:

- **A lack in education that's not the result of a disability**
- **An issue that can be addressed in the classroom**

That's why intervention at the general education level is one of the keys to containing your special education costs. With an MTSS approach, this is also known as a Tier 1 intervention, and has been shown to help students successfully develop necessary skills without the use of related services.

Some examples of Tier 1 interventions include:

- **Encouraging students who struggle with writing to exercise their fingers and hands with putty or experiment with different pencil grips**
- **Practicing deep belly-breathing exercises to regulate emotions**
- **Incorporating quick movement breaks into the classroom routine**
- **Practicing tongue twisters**

By empowering teachers to address concerns at the general education level first, you can reduce referrals overall and contain your special education costs. The best way to encourage your teachers to intervene at the classroom level is to provide them with the necessary skills to do so.

How to Empower Building Staff to Use Tier 1 Interventions in the Classroom

Being able to effectively support students at the general education level is all about providing appropriate teacher trainings and resources. Some ways that you can enable your teachers to intervene at the general education level include:

Educating teachers through in-service trainings

At Pediatric Therapeutic Services (PTS), we provide in-service trainings for our partnering schools so that teachers can learn techniques to effectively respond to Tier 1 concerns. During our in-service trainings, we equip teachers with a variety of useful techniques and interventions so that they're empowered to handle a greater variety of student needs.

Offering trainings to paraprofessionals, teachers' assistants, and teachers of non-academic subjects

In addition to training teachers to intervene at the general education level, it's important to empower other building staff to do so, as well. This includes staff that supervise students when they're not in their normal classroom, like paraprofessionals, teachers' assistants, and recess and lunch aides. Teachers of non-academic subjects like gym, art, and music should be able to effectively address student needs at the classroom level, too.

Have Therapists Push into Collaborative and Co-Taught Classrooms

If you have collaborative or co-taught classrooms at your school, consider having a speech-language pathologist (SLP) or occupational therapist (OT) push into the classroom to instruct all students on skills like articulating certain sounds or adjusting their pencil grip. Remember, often what's beneficial for the highest-need students is beneficial for all students.

3 Practice Effective Group-Based Interventions to Keep Students off Caseload

Students who don't respond positively to Tier 1 interventions may require more specialized group supports and services. These groups may be led by therapists, as well as teachers and paraprofessionals. They tend to be more targeted to the individual and may only be required short-term.

In an MTSS approach, group learning, or Tier 2 interventions, is encouraged before scheduling one-on-one supports. This ensures that additional student needs are being addressed without referring them to related services. Ultimately, keeping the student off caseload (unless they truly need it) will be the best thing for them in terms of their education and perhaps also their confidence.

In many cases, group learning can also promote progress in the students who need to practice social pragmatic language skills because it allows them to practice with other students. Overall, group work provides a multitude of benefits, including giving students an opportunity to:

- **Develop stronger communication skills**
- **Receive social support and encouragement**
- **Establish a shared connection with group members**



Tier 2 Program Supports from PTS

PTS provides several effective activities and program supports that you can implement as part of your Tier 2 intervention strategy based on student need. Some of these are:

Pencil Power™

Pencil Power™ is a program that you can use for first and second graders who need to strengthen their fine motor, visual motor, and handwriting skills. It's a 6-week program that allows you to see fast results without therapist intervention.

Power Moves

Power Moves is a fast-moving gross motor card game that gets everyone up and moving. This simple matching game is ideal for students in Kindergarten through second grade who need to strengthen their balance, coordination, and sensory motor skills.

Arctic Blast™

Our Arctic Blast™ board game is a fast moving, fun, exciting game that allows elementary school students to practice articulation skills. Students will race to be the first to top of the mountain by correctly identifying and articulating the words on the card.

I Know What to Do!

I Know What to Do! is an exciting social skills card game that addresses impulsivity concerns and helps students practice appropriate social responses. By matching the appropriate response to a given scenario, students process through difficult situations that occur throughout the school day in a safe environment.

Containing Your Costs with Group Interventions

Students can see several benefits from group work, and so can your special education program—and your budget. Providing Tier 2 supports in groups allows teachers and therapists to work with multiple students at once, while providing more personalized attention to each student.

Taking this extra step to address students in groups can also keep students out of your related services program and off therapists' caseload. If students do need to be placed on caseload and receive therapies through the related services program, you can also maximize the number of students you serve by grouping them. This allows therapist to help more students while only billing for one session.



4 Collect Data to Effectively Allocate Resources

Often, inefficiently allocated resources are a major driver in increasing special education costs. Unfortunately, using your resources ineffectively can also result in a decrease in quality of support for students. This is something that can be fixed simply by collecting data on your team's caseloads and schedules.

Our Clinical Directors use a software called BudgetWatch™ to monitor your program. This proprietary software from PTS can help us track data like:

- **Caseload and costs by discipline, by school, and by type of specialized program**
- **Referrals by building**
- **Average cost per child by therapy type**
- **Process analysis for student identification**

This data gives us a clear picture of your program's overall effectiveness. Our Clinical Directors can analyze the data and present you with strategic insights and recommendations to help you contain your special ed costs and maximize efficiency within your special education program.

While PTS uses our BudgetWatch™ technology to track data, you can have your teams manually report data such as the number of students they serve, sessions they deliver, and how many referrals they receive.

Tracking Data on Therapists' Schedules

Adjusting your team's schedules is one of the most effective ways to ensure that you're allocating resources most effectively. To do this, you'll want to collect detailed schedules from your team that include:

- **Your therapists' schedules**

Include student names, treatment times, and whether the student is in a low-incidence class so that you can analyze this information to ensure that schedules are set up for efficiency. For example, are there students being seen individually who would be better served in a group setting?

Consider travel time and location, too. If a therapist is frequently traveling from one location to another and back again, they may need an adjustment to their schedule that cuts out the extra travel.

- **Caseload intensity**

While the therapists on your team may see an equal number of students, not all caseloads are created equal. Low-incidence students generally require more consultation and collaboration time than students who are getting part-time learning support.

Also consider group vs. individual treatment. A therapist with students who mostly require individual treatment will not be able to see the same number of students in a day as those with mostly groups.

Review Your Data Frequently

Most importantly, be transparent about how caseloads are distributed with the team and revisit this analysis regularly. Often, therapists' caseloads will shift throughout the year. Identifying therapists who have discharged students can help lighten the load of those who have had several new referrals.

By keeping a careful eye on your therapists' schedules and caseloads, you can reduce strain on your team while ensuring that students receive the careful attention that they need to meet their goals and succeed in the classroom.

5 Keep Therapy Schedules Consistent between In-Person and Remote Learning Formats

The switch to digital or hybrid learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the greatest challenges affecting special education programs today. It may have you wondering if it's possible to maintain a productive and effective special education program during periods of digital learning without affecting your bottom line.

In truth, being able to seamlessly transition from in-person to virtual/hybrid learning can allow you to continue supporting students' needs while also staying mindful of your budget. This is especially vital during times when virtual learning may be the more common method of instruction.

Not to mention, having the infrastructure in place to switch between in-person and digital supports can offer several benefits in the long term, such as:

- **Reducing travel time for therapists who can offer services remotely**
- **Offer services remotely to students learning virtually or who are receiving homebound instruction**
- **Clinical and technical support in the event of another transition to all-virtual learning**
- **Allowing for digital assessments instead of requiring testers to be present on-site**
- **Reduction in number of missed sessions due to inclement weather**

How Students Benefit from a Seamless Transition between In-Person and Digital

Ensuring a sense of consistency between formats is vital for allowing students to progress in their treatment plans. Having to double back to make up progress can increase the number of resources needed overall, while also hindering a student's ability to succeed and potentially be discharged from the program.

Over time, this can cause a strain on your program and your special education costs. By being able to achieve an uninterrupted transition between in-person and remote or digital learning, you'll be able to ensure that:

- **Students get the support they need**
- **Students can effectively be discharged from the program and free up therapist caseloads**
- **Overall costs are effectively contained**



How to Help Students Transition from In-Person to Remote Learning

There are a few things we've found can help students to continue to make progress when moving between in-person and digital learning. These are:

1. Staying Consistent

Transitioning from a familiar in-person learning environment to a digital one can be stressful on students. To create a sense of continuity for students without impeding their progress, keep therapy schedules consistent between all formats. If a student misses a virtual session, therapists can record an asynchronous video that the student can watch with their parents on their own timeline.

2. Continuing group sessions for the students who benefit from them

Not only will continuing group work where it's needed provide even more consistency to students who are used to interacting with certain peers regularly, it can also provide students with a sense of community while learning digitally. So, even in a hybrid or fully digital learning environment, it's important to continue Tier 2 group interventions to keep students off caseload.

Contain Costs for Your Special Ed Program

Providing your students with the supports that they need to succeed in the school environment doesn't need to come with an increase in costs. By cultivating a Therapeutic Ecosystem™ with the right team, tools, and technology, you can actually improve the quality of services you provide while also keeping a mindful eye on your budget.

Contact Pediatric Therapeutic Services today to start taking simple steps to serve your students more effectively and efficiently.





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