

## **NSSEO Overview**

Focused on building futures for students with special needs, NSSEO serves students through programs designed through a person-centered approach to address a range of intense, significant needs as well as providing services and support to students and staff in member districts, ranging from itinerant student services to embedded coaching, technical supports, professional learning and monthly parent training across the eight member districts. NSSEO's success reflects an ongoing, engaged partnership that propels progressive educational practices forward and keeps the focus on what best prepares students to become successful, contributing citizens. The customization of services, programs and district support reflects a responsiveness to individual district needs, driven by the critical focus on the future and the career/college/ life plans of students.

### **NSSEO Special Education Cooperative Membership**

NSSEO includes six elementary districts that include *Community Consolidated School District 21, Prospect Heights School District 23, Arlington Heights School District 25, River Trails School District 26, Mount Prospect School District 57, Community Consolidated District 59*, and the two high school districts, *Township High School District 211 and Township High School District 214*. NSSEO is governed by a Board of District Board Members selected by each of the respective district boards to serve on the NSSEO Governing Board. NSSEO has been a legal district entity since 1963 and operates a district with similar structures and processes of other districts. It was one of very few special education districts in the late 60s before IDEA became law, with parents lobbying legislators in Springfield to serve their children with significant needs in public school systems. It was an important catalyst of our growth as an organization and has continued to fuel our interest in evolving in purpose and impact for the decades that have followed.

Each NSSEO member district has a designated board member and board alternate identified by their respective boards to serve on NSSEO's board and attend monthly board meetings and participate in NSSEO activities and communication regularly. NSSEO works closely with neighboring member district superintendents and special education leadership, meeting regularly on local and state issues, working collaboratively to best support the diverse needs of students. Ongoing efforts with districts, regions, state and national leaders continue to influence evolving high leverage practices to advance and enhance learning opportunities across the NSSEO community.

This year, NSSEO is celebrating its 55th year as a legal school district by intensifying its efforts through a comprehensive NSSEO Continuous Improvement Plan with customized dashboard indicators of growth and goals that advance instructional and social-emotional efforts, supportive and person-centered learning environments, an intensified emphasis on expanding collaborative partnerships and a bright vision for the organization focusing on building a promising future for students. Further expansion in several priority areas and assertive pursuit of grant and funding opportunities reflect a relentless desire to think creatively as advocates and pioneers of change that enhance opportunities for students.

### **NSSEO Programs, Services and Supports**

NSSEO's comprehensive programs, services and supports address the continuum of student needs, reflecting the intensity of services and supports. Kirk School is the largest program in NSSEO and serves approximately 180 secondary students with more significant disabilities ranging in age from 14-22 intensely focusing on designing and refining a transitional plan for each student aligned to

individual interest. Miner School is a customized person-centered program currently serving the needs of students from EC-14 with more significant needs that require an intensive array of well-coordinated support services. After an extensive program redesign, Kirk and Miner programs have continued to evolve in advancing practices and each program has focused on intensifying the depth and scope of the many facets of the respective programs and refining short and long term goals accordingly. Timber Ridge School is an alternative therapeutic day program for students K–8, whose social-emotional and academic needs require a specialized school design with a focus on intense social-emotional therapy and skill development with an ongoing focus on successfully transitioning back to their home schools.

The D/HH satellite programs are housed at Wheeling District 21, Prospect Heights District 23, Des Plaines District 62 and Hersey High School District 214 and provide opportunities in school settings with typical peers, and with individualized programming designed to address needs. Students with hearing impairments across the 45 districts that span the north and northwest suburbs are served through a continuum of services from NSSEO. Students with a range of visual impairments are also served through itinerant services and associated training.

### **The Critical Importance of District Partnerships**

An extensive continuum of district supports include: customized professional learning opportunities, embedded coaching, technical supports for districts and programs, contractual purchased services, specialized evaluations and diagnostics, leadership training, customized district audits, all specially aligned and designed to address district needs, all reflect the wide range of effectiveness and creativity of various educational systems and emphasizes the collaborative design of delivering services and supports needed to maximize learning potential for every student served in the districts across NSSEO. The key to positive impact on these supports is the ongoing collaboration among leaders and staff across NSSEO and districts and responsiveness to district needs and interests. Additional efforts and measures have been designed to reflect the expansive district benefits of the ongoing partnership with NSSEO and that focus and diligent work will continue over the many years ahead.

### **Sunrise Lake Outdoor Education Center (SLOEC)**

Another very unique, specialized learning space for districts, programs and patterns is the NSSEO outdoor education center, Sunrise Lake Outdoor Education Center (SLOEC) located in Bartlett that services thousands annually, ranging from school teams to corporate team-building events that offers expansive and customized experiential learning experiences. In addition to hundreds of visitors every week, SLOEC hosts two special events annually - Harvest Fest and Winter Wonderland, that welcome families to engage in fun learning experiences with their children and is a wonderful way to show the incredible benefits of experiential learning.

### **NSSEO Project Highlights**

Exciting organizational accomplishments aligned to the mission/vision of NSSEO over the past few years include several student-focused project highlights.

In September, 2017 NSSEO opened the new adapted Tobler-PATHS Athletic field, on the Kirk Secondary campus, designed to provide a special Olympic field designed to enhance recreational opportunities and sports activities.

NSSEO opened a Parent Education Resource Center (PERC) in November, 2017 on the Kirk Campus with an intensified focus on networking, parent education and providing ongoing opportunities and resources to support families' needs as they navigate the challenges and transitions throughout their child's educational career. The Parent Advisory Council (PAC) meets with NSSEO leadership quarterly to discuss goals, parent training, evolving practices and areas of focus for the following year. The

importance of parents as parents in the support of students' educational journeys and life planning is evident in many aspects of NSSEO aligned to the mission and vision of the organization.

NSSEO spearheaded Positive Pathways in December, 2020 facilitating forums with member district special education leaders, regional representatives, ISBE and local legislators to focus on important positive steps forward with a significant focus on steps, practices and collaborative efforts that will advance positive change.

NSSEO also values state and national opportunities to actively engage in efforts that support the organizational goals. There are various ways this focus is reflected in practice. In July, 2021 NSSEO was awarded the state multi-year grant to provide oversight and coordination of the Illinois Service Resource Center (ISRC) which provides family support and resources to students who are deaf/hard of hearing or who have visual impairments and that may require additional social-emotional needs.

In August, 2021, Miner School officially opened its inclusive "Playground for Everyone", a specialized playground for students with a range of disabilities open to the community. Through the collaborative efforts of working closely with local legislators, NSSEO was awarded a significant state economic development grant of \$450,000 in 2019 and along with several generous donations of many amazing partners and contributors, it has become a popular place for children with special needs and families across many communities to enjoy outdoor learning and exploration.

Timber Ridge School recently celebrated the completion of an extensive building project that included a full size gym, elevator and additional classroom and sensory space for students. It is the largest construction project in decades and reflects a very student-focused commitment to advancing important priorities through collaborative school/family/community partnerships.

NSSEO was awarded an extensive multi-year grant in November, 2021 through the National Bureau of Justice that provides more than \$600,000 in funds to support extensive advancement of SEL goals that include CASEL efforts, Courageous Conversations district-wide efforts that focus on diversity, equity and inclusion and other important supports aligned to student needs.

In the summer of 2022, NSSEO was awarded the statewide Special Education Leadership Academy (SELA) multi-year grant with the provision of state discretionary funds for NSSEO to facilitate a collaborative planning and decision-making process for development, coordination and assistance of professional development, mentoring and planning for next year' Directors of Special Education conference at the state level.

### **NSSEO Mission/Vision**

The mission of NSSEO reflects why we exist - *NSSEO propels students with special needs to be actively engaged citizens through dynamic family, school and community partnerships.* The why drives the work every day and reflects a very student-focused purpose. The vision, core values and annual goals and objectives reflect that purpose and guide the focus, emphasis and reflective review of the collective efforts. We provide an update related to our CIP at every monthly Board meeting and have developed associated dashboard measures to guide our progress and assist in refining objectives, adjusting our strategies and guiding the focus of our future priorities and next steps. Cultivating and advancing district partnerships, customizing supports and meeting changing needs of students, staff and districts is an ongoing critical focus for NSSEO. In pursuit of our NSSEO vision, we continue to navigate ways to build greater opportunities to partner with community members, stakeholders and actively engage in regional, state and national opportunities focused on students with special needs and building a future that is person-centered, meaningful and collaborative.

NSSEO's vision statement, *Enhancing students' talents and dreams for a promising future* emulates the importance of partnerships with families, community leaders, legislators, state and federal leaders

to provide progressive practices uniquely designed to meet the needs of our most diverse learners. One of the core values of NSSEO captures the passion of our work “Looking beyond what is, to what is possible”. It is that student-centered belief that compels us to do our best every day to enhance and advance greater opportunities and create possibilities that positively transform the life plans of students with special needs. The following provides a brief overview of the 2022-2023 Continuous Improvement Plan guiding the focus for the school year.

## **Our Mission**

### *Why We Exist*

NSSEO propels students with special needs to be actively engaged citizens through dynamic family, school and community partnerships.

## **Our Vision**

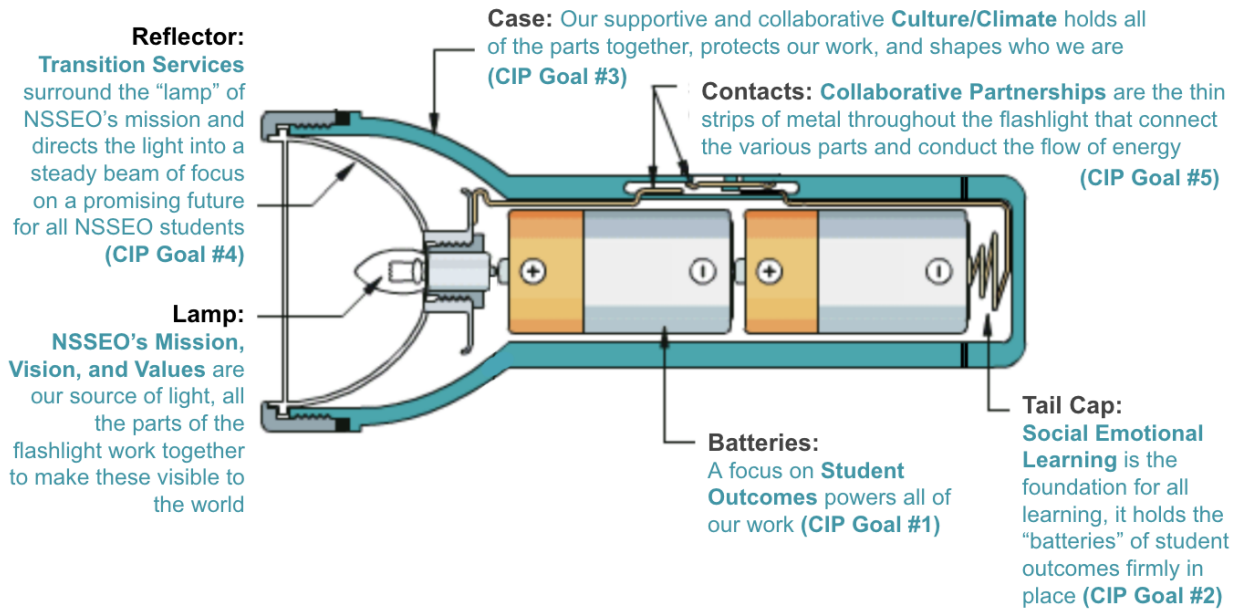
### *Our Desired State, Where We are Headed*

Enhancing students’ talents and dreams for a promising future.

## **Our Core Values**

### *What We Believe, What We Stand For*

- a person-centered philosophy that reflects an individualized focus on students’ strengths, desires, and life goals
- students, families and communities engaged in a rigorous, exciting learning process
- connecting and collaborating through partnerships designed to expand and advance meaningful opportunities for students
- high standards, systems and innovative practices that enhance growth for students, staff and leaders
- equitable opportunities and practices that provide for the diversity, culture and inclusion of all students, families, and staff
- looking beyond what is, to what is possible



## NSSEO Continuous Improvement Plan Goals

### *Our Priorities, What We will Achieve*

- 1. Student Outcomes** - Foster development, ongoing growth and positive outcomes for all students.
- 2. Social Emotional Learning** - Promote social emotional learning and growth for all.
- 3. Supportive, Collaborative, and Person-Centered Learning Environment** - Foster a supportive, collaborative, and person-centered learning environment to promote growth for all.
- 4. Transition Services** - Upon exiting from NSSEO services, 100% of students will have defined post-secondary plans indicating focus on the priority areas of social, community and/or work experiences for at least 50% of a work week.
- 5. Collaborative Partnerships** - Further advance our collaborative partnerships across the educational community to deepen equitable, inclusive practices that are future driven and influence positive change.

### Summary

NSSEO has been known as an exemplary organization for many years for its progressive, continuously evolving focus on a student-centered, customized approach to student learning and support for staff and leaders to guide educational growth. NSSEO actively pursues new opportunities to expand their efforts for the betterment of students and families and believes strongly that learning is a lifelong experience for students, families, staff and leaders. It is committed to providing ongoing opportunities, support and partnerships that reflect the depth of purpose essential for organizational impact. The NSSEO goals depicted in the flashlight

intensify the light shining on our future and this year our theme of “Illuminating our Purpose” turns up the voltage of light and possibilities to guide our journey forward into the important brighter future for NSSEO. We are looking forward to expanding our NSSEO community, welcoming partners to join us in this important educational journey and we look forward to the exciting possibilities ahead driven by purpose.

Judy Hackett, EdD  
Superintendent  
August, 2022