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**Special Education Follow-up
Report**

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Next Steps

The following are recommendations based on the earlier evaluation of San Diego Unified School District, ongoing discussions with district leadership, and a synthesis of information gleaned from the recent parent, staff and community forums conducted by the Special Education Department. These focus on three broad activities: (1) the establishment of a set of measurable outcomes that will be used to guide reform efforts over the next three years, (2) a series of recommendations concerning the current work groups related to these outcomes, and (3) a set of recommendations for actions that the district's leadership should pursue immediately. In addition, the Special Education Department will need a significant reorganization in order to support the reform efforts and this process should be initiated this year.

Establish Measurable Outcomes

An important way to determine if progress is being made in organizational reform is to establish measurable outcomes that will lead to improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities and, in the case of San Diego, ensure that special education is not being used to serve students for whom such placements are inappropriate. This approach has been used successfully in the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) efforts to comply with IDEA under the Chanda Smith Modified Consent Decree. In Los Angeles, outcome measures were established as a way of determining progress under class action litigation. This method provides an objective means in which interested parties can determine if the district is making progress and thus avoid anecdotal and biased judgments. Further, these outcomes have been used successfully by the district to target schools most in need of improvement and to identify other schools engaged in exemplary practice. All of the parties in the Los Angeles case have acknowledged the significant progress the district has made because progress can be objectively verified.

Though San Diego is not involved in class action litigation at this time, this method would be appropriate because the system is large and progress needs to be objectively determined. Also, measurable outcomes can provide a much needed focus for staff activities and provide direction on the use of resources. This outcome-based approach also has the advantage of being translated to the school-level.

It should be noted that San Diego is at a higher baseline level than Los Angeles. The proposed outcomes set forth below are related to the major findings and recommendations in the previous evaluation. They build on existing strengths within the system and can be easily communicated to staff and parents. It should also be emphasized that these outcomes are inter-related and focus on improving student performance.

(1) Increase student academic achievement

The relatively low and flat performance of students with disabilities on the CST was presented to participants at the parent, staff and community forums in August 2008. A number of parents testified that these numbers did not surprise them because they felt their

children were insufficiently challenged in special education. However, for most of the participants, including a large number of school district employees, the data appeared to be new and disturbing. This, coupled with the superintendent's leadership on this issue, sets the stage for greater attention to this issue.

The improvement of student achievement levels needs to be the central focus of special education reform. Low performance levels place students in jeopardy of dropping out and failing to graduate. Finally, both the district and individual schools are likely to experience increased state-level involvement under NCLB's AYP requirements for students with disabilities.

The district should consider establishing achievement outcomes to increase the number of students scoring at proficient or advanced and reduce the number of students in each of the categories of below basic and far below basic. The targets should be structured to prevent staff from concentrating inordinate attention on students who are close to being proficient at the expense of those who are below basic.

(2) **Decrease the achievement gap between students with disabilities and non-disabled students**

Closely related to the first outcome area is reducing the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Contrary to the trend in many districts where students with disabilities are experiencing greater relative gains, the gap is widening in SDUSD. Though movement on the student achievement outcome may narrow the gap, a separate gap measure should be established that is consistent with the SMART goals established by the district's leadership.

(3) **Increase the placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment**

There is a significant body of research indicating that increased placement in the least restrictive environment is associated with higher performance on the part of most students with disabilities. SDUSD's data reveals that large numbers of students with disabilities are educated in predominantly segregated environments. Currently, the data is reported to the state and federal level, with several data points representing relative levels of integration (separate facility, special day class, up to 20 percent in special education, etc.) The mathematical challenge in establishing an outcome in this area is that student movement out of one category means an increase in another, thus creating "moving targets." Given the placement patterns within San Diego, where relatively large numbers of students are served in special day classes and relatively few students are served in partially integrated settings, the district should consider a target focused on reducing the percentage of students with disabilities who spend 60 percent or more of their time in special education settings, thereby increasing the percentage served in general education settings. By establishing the outcome in this way, the district can avoid the wholesale precipitous movement of students into regular education classrooms that may not be prepared to serve the students.

(4) Increase the number of students served in home schools and in parental choice options

In SDUSD, many students with disabilities are assigned to schools other than the one they would attend if they were not disabled. Though this practice may be justified in some cases, this widespread practice unduly separates students from their siblings and friends, increases transportation costs, and, when large numbers of students with disabilities are assigned to certain schools, makes integration into general classrooms more difficult to achieve. Related to this issue is the finding that non-conversion charters are not serving equitable numbers of students with disabilities nor are they serving many students with significant needs. The district should consider an outcome aimed at increasing the number of students attending home schools and exercising parental choice options. The district should also consider a target to increase the number of students with disabilities attending non-conversion charter schools with a sub-measure for students with more significant needs.

(5) Reduce the over-representation of minorities in special education

The over-representation of minorities in special education is a serious issue that raises civil rights concerns. There is no evidence that this practice improves student outcomes. The data indicates that over-representation is occurring for Latino English language learners and for African Americans in programs serving students with emotional disturbance. Under IDEA 2004, the federal government monitors over-representation using risk ratios. The district can establish outcomes seeking a reduction in the risk ratios of students referred to special education programs for each of these populations. It also could consider, as is the case in LAUSD, establishing an outcome that focuses on fundamental improvements in the pre-referral, referral and identification processes.

(6) Reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates

Students with disabilities drop out at higher levels than non-disabled students and graduate at lower rates. Further, students with disabilities are less apt to complete other routes to high school diplomas than their non-disabled peers, such as GED programs. The district should consider establishing outcomes in this area to reduce the drop out rate of students with disabilities and increase the completion rate with a diploma.

(7) Reduce suspension and expulsion rates for students with disabilities

High suspension and expulsion rates are associated with dropping out of school and poor academic outcomes. Therefore, suspension and expulsion should be avoided as much as possible. The district should consider an outcome to reduce the number of students with multiple suspensions, such as those who are suspended five or more consecutive days. The district should provide baseline data for the expulsion rate of students with disabilities and if necessary, develop an outcome in this area.

(8) Increase parental involvement

It is important that the district administration continue to improve relationships with parents. In addition to specific actions designed to improve relationships, such as more frequent opportunities for parent input, it is important to establish ways to measure improved parental involvement. One possible measure would be to establish an outcome

that seeks to increase the number of parents who participate in their child's IEP meeting. It is strongly recommended that the district conduct a scientific survey to determine the level of parent satisfaction in their children's programs, which could then be used to establish a satisfaction baseline.

Work Groups

Consistent with previous recommendations, the district established three work groups and an executive committee to implement the recommendations deriving from the earlier evaluation. Assuming that the district adopts the outcome-based approach recommended above, these groups should assume primary responsibility for developing specific outcomes and target. This process should begin by establishing baselines for each of the potential outcomes. Given the district's strong data systems, this task should be completed by November 2008 for any proposed outcomes except for the parent satisfaction outcome, which would be dependent upon a survey.

Each group will need to establish outcome targets for each measure. Given the fact that substantive changes to improve performance on outcome measures will take time and significant staff development activities, these targets should be established with a three-year timeframe. This task should be completed by late December 2008 and should be approved by the executive committee at that time.

After approval of outcomes and targets, the committee should prepare recommendations concerning implementation. These recommendations should include policy changes that do not involve expenditures; others may involve staff development, which usually entails significant cost. Each work group will be responsible for identifying immediate actions, if applicable, and submit those to the executive committee for implementation by January 2008. Next, the groups will be responsible for recommending action steps relevant to a three-year timeline. These actions should be both ambitious and realistic. It is likely that many of these actions will involve staff development and should take place prior to the opening of school. These long-term recommendations should be submitted to the executive committee by mid-February 2009 to allow sufficient time for making budgetary decisions and for planning activities.

The following are recommendations for outcome area assignment:

Pre-referral Intervention (RTI): Outcomes 5 and 7

Unified System: Outcomes 3, 4 and 8

Improving Instruction: Outcomes 1, 2 and 6

Executive Committee

This group plays a critical function in ensuring that necessary resources are available to support the work groups while also dealing with policy, budgetary and human resource implications. This group should be reconstituted. It should be composed of senior cabinet members and, as is the case with all groups, should have parent representation. This group should include the senior executive from each of the following departments: Student Services, Finance, Human Resources, Special Education, Logistics, Curriculum and Instruction, School Chiefs, Instructional Technology and parent groups.

Immediate Steps

(1) Changes in the Encore IEP system

A number of concerns have been raised by parents and the CAC regarding the Encore system. These should be addressed immediately.

(2) Continue forums

The forums already have allowed both parents and staff to be informed of changes while also giving them a chance to voice concerns. These should occur quarterly.

(3) Establish an enhanced parent hotline

Some parents who attended the forums relayed stories of extreme frustration in attempting to secure appropriate services for their children and their exhaustive attempts to find responsible people who could act on their behalf. It is recommended that a parent hotline be established in special education to field complaints and provide speedy resolution.

(4) Curtail the practice of sending central office staff to IEP Meetings

Parents testified at the forums and during interviews that they felt “targeted” by central office as “problem parents.” They indicated that central office staff, who were unfamiliar with their child and had not conducted an evaluation, were present at IEP meetings. This practice has contributed to negative parent relations. Central office staff can be involved in meetings when local expertise may be lacking, but parents should be informed when such participation is being sought and approve of this participation.

(5) Begin planning a principal institute

Given the fundamental role that principals play in improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities, the district must prioritize principal training. A principal institute focused on special education should be substantive, concentrating on the role of the principal in improving instruction for students with disabilities in inclusive, universally designed classrooms and should commence in the spring 2009.

(6) Significantly curtail the designation of students with disabilities as “non-diploma bound”

The practice of identifying students as “non-diploma bound” surfaced frequently in the forums, as well as the interviews conducted for the previous evaluation. This practice may be contributing to the poor performance of students with disabilities as it undoubtedly leads to lower expectations and limits access to the content measured by the CST. The district must determine the extent of the practice and, upon analysis of the data, consider a policy prohibiting its inappropriate use.

(7) Develop and disseminate a comprehensive policy and procedures manual

The participants in the forum raised many concerns and questions about how San Diego implements its obligations under state and federal law. Though the Special Education

Department has such policies, they are not readily available to parents and staff and need to be revised to reflect current law and district priorities. Everybody involved in special education must know the rules if the system is to move forward. A well-constructed, accessible manual will go a long way to accomplishing this goal.