

RIVERSIDE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPECIAL EDUCATION REVIEW EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PHASE ONE: Financial Audit

PHASE TWO: Comparative Data and Analysis

PHASE THREE: Program Delivery and Analysis



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PREFACE

Total School Solutions (TSS) conducted a comprehensive special education financial and program review for the Riverside Unified School District (RUSD). Three phases of this study completed to date include: (1) Financial Audit; (2) Comparative Data and Analysis; and, (3) Program Delivery Analysis. Phase 4, Development and Implementation of a Special Education Strategic Action Plan, will be conducted beginning January 2017.

The RUSD is to be commended for its commitment to study and analyze its special education financial data, programs, and operations. Throughout this study process, District personnel were extremely helpful in providing pertinent information and/or compiling critical data needed to complete this analysis. In particular, a thank you is due to the District Departments of Special Education and Business Services, who responded immediately to every request, shared pertinent data, and were always available to assist in any way possible. Commendation goes also to the Board Members, Superintendent, Chief Business Officer and Governmental Relations, and Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Services and Special Education who are committed to a systemic change process to afford children with disabilities quality programs and services provided in the least restrictive settings.

STUDY ACTIVITIES

Study activities utilized during the course of this review are outlined below.

- Work closely with District fiscal and program personnel to collect and compile financial reports, enrollment data, and program information.
- Analyze financial, program, and pupil count data and prepare pertinent reports.
- Present a draft report of Phase One (*Financial Audit*) and Phase Two (*Comparative Data and Analysis*) to key business and program personnel for review and revisions as needed prior to finalizing these sections.
- Submit a draft report of Phase Three (*Program Delivery and Analysis*) to key program personnel for review and revisions as needed, prior to finalizing this section.
- Submit a final integrated report (Phases One, Two, and Three) to the District.
- Present the report(s), findings, and recommendations as requested by the Superintendent.
- Two TSS Consultants to conduct three days of interviews and/or meetings with stakeholders (e.g., board members, parents, district and site-level administrators and support staff, special and general education teachers, related service providers, pupil personnel, health service providers, and classified staff). Hold interviews and meetings at the District Special Education Office.
- Provide an opportunity to individual board members and parents to meet or talk with TSS Consultants and share their concerns as well as commendations and/or positive aspects.
- Lead a parent input meeting in the evening to facilitate optimum participation.
- Develop and collate a “Special Education Parent Survey.”
- Assist the District in preparing a Special Education Strategic Action Plan (“Action Plan”) to include (a) District-prioritized focus areas and planning strategies based on the findings and recommendations from the special education study; (b) projected timelines; (c) persons responsible for implementation; and, (d) program and/or fiscal adjustments/implications (to be conducted after study process is completed).
- Conduct two days of visitation to assist in implementing the Action Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PHASE ONE: FINANCIAL AUDIT

A financial audit of state and federal revenue and expenditures for special education programs was conducted for Fiscal Years 2011-12 through 2016-17. State and federal special education program revenue and grants were reviewed, including Out-of-Home Care funding and Mental Health Services apportionment. Expenditures were analyzed by specific object codes (e.g., certificated and classified salaries, employee benefits, book/supplies, and other operating expenses including nonpublic school/agency contracted services).

Notable increases in specific object codes from prior fiscal years were analyzed to determine those expenses that could result in more adverse financial implications. Contributing areas were identified that may have created and/or increased excess costs. Preliminary recommendations were provided in the full report for District's consideration in order to maximize existing revenue and/or reduce the contribution from the general fund to special education, where appropriate.

FINDINGS

- With Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), transfer of revenue limit dollars for special education students was eliminated, and as such the deficiency of special education revenue to expenditures increased requiring additional contribution from the general fund.
- In reviewing the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), there is no specific language to address the needs of student with disabilities, as well as help offset the deficit due to the elimination of revenue limit dollars transfers.
- With substantial increases in Mental Health Services funding from one fiscal year to the next, Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) continues to have a large excess of revenue to expenditures in Resource Code 5640.
- There is a significant ending fund balance in the LEA Medi-Cal Billing Option Program.
- Although the number of nonpublic school (NPS) pupils significantly decreased across the fiscal years studied, the NPS costs did not decrease proportionately.
- The nonpublic agency (NPA) costs decreased across the fiscal years studied, which could indicate that District employees are providing these related services as needed. For example, RUSD has built capacity related to Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and created a cadre of behavior intervention specialized staff members.
- Combined legal expenses from Special Education and the General Fund increased by approximately \$384,000 or 85 percent from Fiscal Year (FY) 2014-15 to FY 2015-16.
- Contributing areas identified that may have created and/or increased excess costs include:
 - a. Less Assembly Bill 602 state entitlement due to declining average daily attendance;
 - b. Elimination of transfer of revenue limit dollars due to implementation of LCFF;
 - c. Series of negotiated certificated and classified salary agreements, as well as an increase in services to students in the form of increasing daily instructional hours;
 - d. Capping special education class sizes resulting in opening additional classes;
 - e. Higher number of identified pupils with speech and language development needs requiring speech pathology related services; and,
 - f. Providing more services to accommodate pupils enrolled under District of Choice and inter-district permits.

PHASE TWO: COMPARATIVE DATA AND ANALYSIS

In order to determine operational functions and service deliveries that have financial implications, special education pupil count data were analyzed and when appropriate compared to statewide averages and benchmarks. This information included, but was not limited to: number and percent of students identified by disability group, grade level, and age range; type and frequency of services provided to special education students; percentage of time students (by disability) were served in general education classes and other instructional settings; and, special education enrollment trends compared to total enrollment.

FINDINGS

- There are significant differences in the District of Residence (DOR) pupil count reported by RUSD as compared to the District of Service (DOS) pupil count. Although RUSD assumes all financial and educational responsibility, these pupils are reported as DOS only. There are no contracts or inter-SELPA permits that allow RUSD to determine excess costs for IEP-required programs and services rendered to these pupils.
- In comparing the percent of enrollment by disability for December 2012 through 2015, categories showing growth included: Other Health Impairment (OHI); Specific Learning Disability (SLD); and, Autism. On the contrary, Speech or Language Impairment (SLI), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Orthopedic Impairment (OI) showed a decline.
- Regarding pupils with ED, a decrease was reported from 182 pupils in 2012 to 112 in 2015. It appears that some pupils are receiving limited or no 500 Code services related to counseling, guidance, psychological, social work, and/or behavior intervention.
- Some nonpublic schools (NPS) have bundled their daily rate that might include the basic educational program along with counseling and guidance and other related Mental Health educationally based services. As such, these related services might not appear on the pupils' individualized education program (IEP).
- As of December 2011 through 2015, RUSD reported a lower percentage of disability categories than statewide averages in: Hard of Hearing (HH); Deaf; Visual Impairment (VI); ED; OI; SLD; and, Autism. On the contrary, RUSD had a higher percentage in: Intellectual Disability (ID); SLI; OHI; and, Multiple Disability (MD).
- Although the number of SLI pupils has decreased, the District's percentage is higher than statewide averages. Also, approximately 46-48 percent of the speech therapy was provided as a related service in December 2014 and 2015 to pupils with other disabilities than speech impairment.
- The number of pupils reported as "Other/Ungraded" increased from 52 in 2011 to 130 in 2015.

PHASE THREE: PROGRAM DELIVERY ANALYSIS

A review of special education program operations, including current staffing levels and patterns, was conducted to determine if the District could decrease and/or increase staff, and/or make any staffing changes to include, but not limited to: special education teachers; related service providers (e.g., speech and language pathologists, adapted physical education teachers, occupational therapists; physical therapists, behaviorists, nurses); pupil personnel (e.g., psychologists); other contracts service providers; and, paraprofessionals.

An analysis of the District's current special education program delivery systems was conducted to determine if they are appropriate as structured or if opportunities exist for enhancing program delivery in the least restrictive environment (LRE), in which to the maximum extent possible, students with disabilities are educated with other students in the regular educational environment. The review addressed the percentage of students receiving services in regular classes, separate special education programs, and separate schools or facilities.

This evaluation included a comprehensive review of District-operated special education programs and services. In looking at a system of operations and instructional settings, special education as a service under a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI), was addressed.

Two TSS Consultants conducted three days of on-site meetings and interviews with key groups of stakeholders. A parent forum was held in the evening to facilitate optimum participation. Follow-up emails for continued information gathering as well as and phone conferences were held with stakeholders who were not available during the site interviews. Furthermore, a *Special Education Parent Survey* (in English and Spanish) was mailed to the home address of every special education student enrolled in the RUSD, with a stamped return envelope to the address of Total School Solutions Office in Fairfield, California.

FINDINGS

Staffing Levels And Patterns

- There have been notable increases in special education teachers; mostly a result of adding classes pursuant to the special education class size language in the Agreement for Certificated Bargaining Unit ("Agreement"). Also, one new Transitional Kindergarten (TK) class and two new preschool classes were opened.
- There have been notable increases in instructional assistants; mostly a result of adding classes pursuant to the special education class size language in the Agreement. Also, Intensive Behavior Interventions Assistants were added and a number of assistants may have been increased due to students entering the District with aides included on their IEPs.
- Although the Special Education Department has an allocation formula to assign instructional assistants to each school site based on the number of special education classes and adherence to the special education class size language in the Agreement, it appears that a system is not in place to monitor on a regular basis, the actual number of aide hours at each school site in order to determine if a current employee is available to fill immediate vacancies and/or assist with assigning specific special circumstances for individual students.
- The Special Education Department recently adopted a formal process and protocol when determining the need for special circumstance instructional assistants for individual students. Training has been provided to principals and other school site administrators.
- The District is cognizant of mandated state staffing caseloads (e.g., Resource Specialists and Speech and Language Pathologists) and actively recruits to adhere to these statutes and/or contracts with nonpublic agencies to fill the vacancies.
- The Special Education Department and Human Resources has actively recruited for positions to build capacity within its own programs (e.g., Occupational Therapists, Intervention Specialists).

- The Early Childhood Assessment Team (ECAT), comprised of psychologists, speech pathologists, as well as a nurse, occupational therapist, or other related service provider(s) as needed, is a time-consuming process and involved approximately 200 assessments last year for determination of eligibility for special education services at the preschool level. It appears that there is adequate staffing to complete these assessments. However, the nursing staff indicated a need for additional time to participate fully in the ECAT process.
- There appears to be inadequate support to school sites with only six full-time Program Specialists. Their assignments were restructured this school year so that each Program Specialist serves specific number of schools along with having other specialty responsibilities based on their expertise.

Special Education Program Delivery Systems

- Adoption of evidence-based curriculum and expansion of course offerings have provided special education students more access to the core curriculum.
- The District provides a comprehensive continuum of programs for special education students across the school sites, including an alternative campus.
- It appears that there are limited “push-in” or integration models at the secondary level. Integration models would include having the majority of services provided in general education classes with the support from special education teachers and other related service providers.
- The District did not meet its state-imposed targets for Indicator 5A and 5B–Least Restrictive Environment. The 5C target was met in 2013-14, but not 2014-15. Indicator 5 measures the average amount of time special education pupils, between the ages of 6 through 21, receive their services in settings apart from peers without disabilities.
- The District did not meet its Indicator 6–Preschool Least Restrictive Environment for 2013-14 and 2014-15. Indicator 6 measures the percent of children ages 3 through 5 with IEPs attending regular early childhood program and receiving a majority of special education and related services in the regular program or, in a separate special education class, separate school or residential facility.
- Intensive behavioral intervention supports and psychological services are provided for students with social-emotional needs, including global implementation of Boys Town curriculum and interventions across all classes designed for students with emotional and behavioral disorders.
- The Student Assistance Program (SAP) was repeatedly cited during the stakeholder meetings as a critical resource for special education students, especially in the area of social and emotional support personnel to provide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
- District personnel, who provide related services in the areas of adapted physical education, speech therapy, and occupational therapy, work collaboratively within each of their special areas. There specific challenges that face each of these areas, which are addressed separately in the full report.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

- Some of the teaching staff did not know the distinction between RtI and MTSS; however, it appears that numerous educators were providing levels of support within the context of RtI and/or MTSS.

- The District has a clear understanding of a MTSS framework and has implemented elements of MTSS initiated this school year. Considerable district-wide planning has occurred through the Curriculum and Instruction Department, and a MTSS Specialist has been employed. Special Education Department representatives have been included in this process and attend monthly focus meetings.
- All components of the Student Success Team (SST) intervention process have been integrated within a MTSS and RtI structure to include detailed procedures, forms, and professional development. However, the SST process is not being implemented consistently across all school sites.

Stakeholder Input

- District personnel who participated in the three-day stakeholder meetings were professional and open in sharing their concerns as well as providing constructive ideas for improvement. There were many positive comments shared during the discussions and it was evident that the members of each job-alike group respect one another and collaborate to do what's best for their students.
- It was clear during the personal discussions with the special education teachers and related service providers that they are dedicated, hardworking, and are interested in looking at different service delivery models to promote maximum student learning as well as more inclusion into general education settings.
- All staff members interviewed believed that there is good communication from the District Office to the school sites and educators are afforded many opportunities for professional development.

Parent Input

- Based on the results of a *Special Education Parent Survey*, the majority of the responses (from 84 to 97 percent) were in the categories of “strongly agree” and “agree.” A few parents noted individual concerns on their surveys.
- During a parent input session, with approximately twelve participants and several follow-up phone calls made by the TSS Consultant, individual parent and student challenges were raised. The concerns and challenges will be provided confidentially to Special Education District administrators for follow-up.

PHASE FOUR: SPECIAL EDUCATION STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

A TSS Consultant will assist the District in preparing a Special Education Strategic Action Plan to include (a) District-prioritized focus areas and planning strategies based on the findings and recommendations from this study; (b) projected timelines; (c) persons responsible for implementation; and, (d) program and/or fiscal adjustments/implications. Two days of consultation will be provided to assist in implementing the Strategic Action Plan.