



South San Francisco Unified School District

Special Education Study

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Study Purpose

- **Creating effective, high-quality, and legally compliant special education programs is a goal for every local educational agency (LEA) in California**
- **Districts are working to improve student achievement, ensure access to a broad continuum of social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health resources, and to have fiscally responsible and sustainable programs for all students**
- **The pressures to achieve learning recovery, provide equitable access with inclusive practices, and hire qualified staff have amplified the challenges of running effective and efficient programs**
- **The South San Francisco Unified School District (District) requested a review of its Special Education Department (Department) to offer an assessment of and recommendations on how to improve the impact of its Special Education Program (Program) implementation in a cost-effective and fiscally sustainable manner**
- **The study used a multifaceted approach to engage with the Program and then recommended changes to help the District operate a fiscally responsible, high-quality, and legally compliant Program with a focus on inclusive practices, equity of access, and student outcomes**

2 Study Scope and Methodology

District Data

Analysis of district-level data related to the Program, including financial information, pupil counts, class sizes, caseloads, and staffing

Comparative Data

Analysis of fiscal and special education data from LEAs of similar type and size to compare Program revenues, expenditures, staffing levels, and costs

Interviews

Interviews with District staff, including leadership and principals, special and general education staff, related services providers, and classified staff



Organization of the Report

Organizational Effectiveness

Assessment of organizational effectiveness, and the structures in place to oversee, manage, and support students with disabilities (SWDs)

Special Education Cost Drivers

Examination of the number of students being served by disability type and the extent to which pre-referral interventions successfully reduce referrals to special education

Special Education Staffing

Comparative analysis of the Program, including related services and classroom staffing



Revenue and Expenditure

Analysis of District special education revenue and Program costs

Alignment

Consideration of the alignment of the District's Local Control and Accountability Plan, teaching and learning initiatives, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and the Program

4 Alignment with Strategic Plan

- The goals of the Strategic Plan include opportunities to provide “exceptional instruction, engaging experience, and equitable and accessible opportunities and resources”
- The priorities and initiatives include “actions that foster welcoming, self-affirming, and inclusive learning” environments
- Goals for curriculum and instruction include “tailoring teaching methods to the specific needs of” students to “close achievement gaps, promote inclusivity, and ensure every learner has access to a high-quality education”
 - Staff, families, and students want differentiated instruction and support that meets the needs of all learners
 - Refined Core Values focus on community, relationships, resilience, and equity

Strategic Plan

Providing Exceptional Instruction

Engaging Students

Establishing Purposeful Partnerships

Empowering Educators

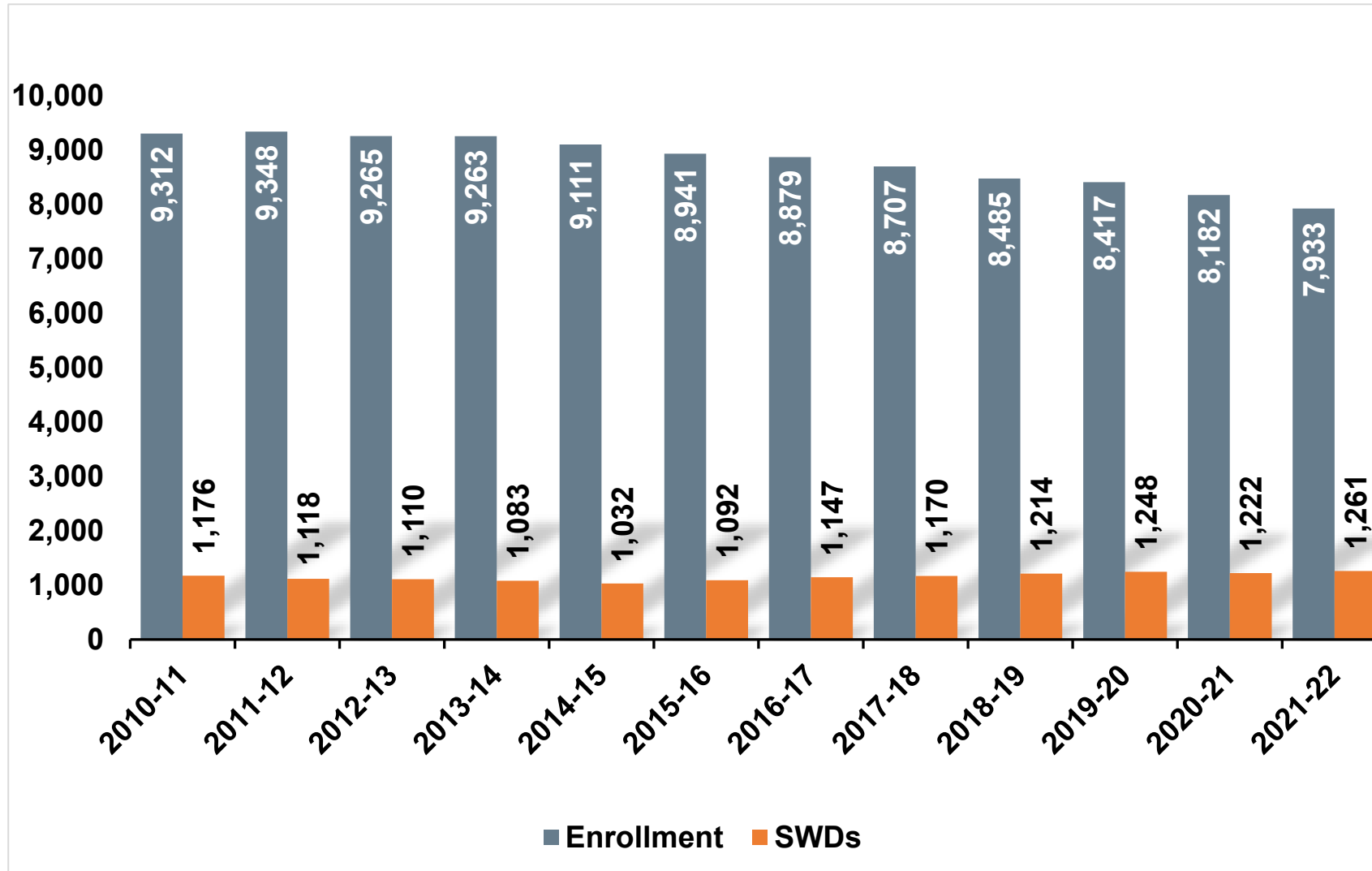
Creating Equity-Centered Systems

Program Strengths

- Interviews and data revealed many strengths and assets
- The Department consistently uses and analyzes student data and outcomes
- Student needs guide service delivery, placement, and Program support
- Department policy and procedures for special education practices are strong, compliant, and easily available
- Systemic themes of trust, strong communication, and clear expectations were reported by Program staff



District Enrollment and Number of SWDs

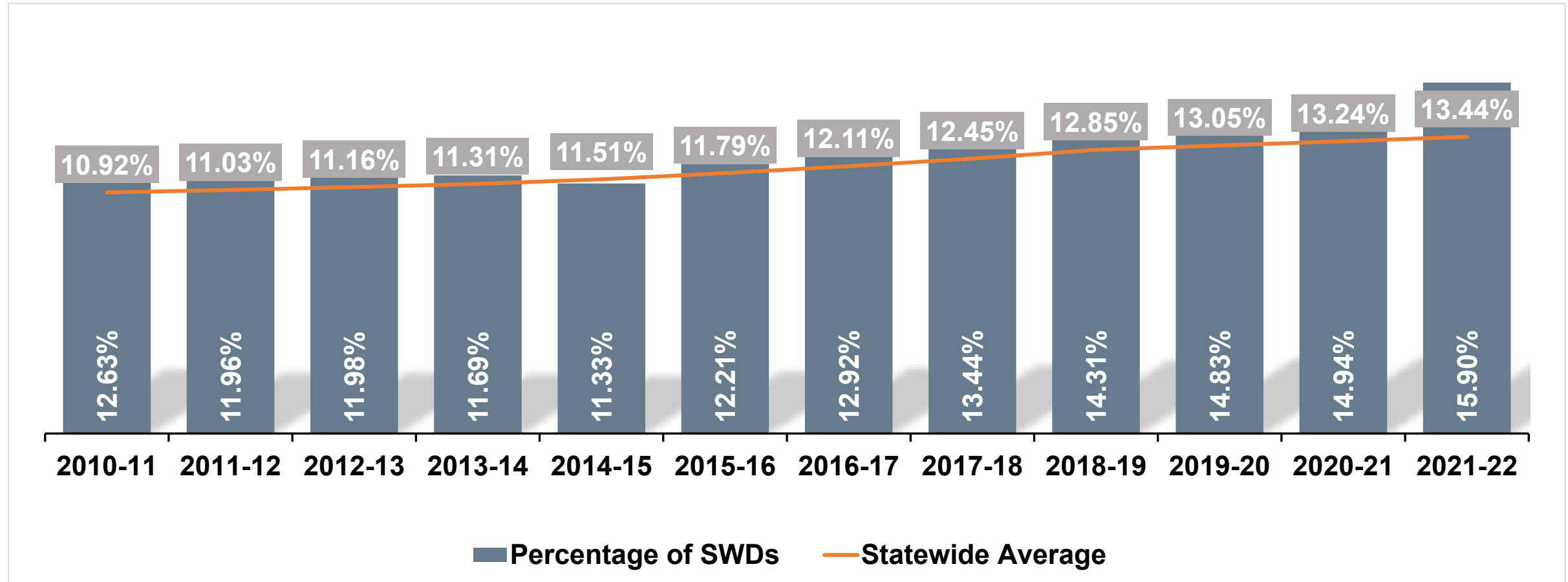


- The District has experienced declines in enrollment in the past 12 years
- Overall, the number of SWDs increased slightly over the same period, but year-to-year comparisons do not show a consistent pattern
- With a slight increase in SWD numbers, the rate of students identified for services has grown from 12.63% in 2010-11 to 15.90% in 2021-22
- The statewide average for 2021-22 is 13.44%

Source: State-certified data

Special Education Percentage of Enrollment

The current total percentage of 16.76% SWDs continues a trend of outpacing the statewide average, which has also increased to 13.70% over the past decade



Source: State-certified data

8 Organizational Effectiveness

Standards and Areas of Investigation

- **The ability to provide effective instructional programs—to meet the needs of students and ensure high-quality outcomes—is dependent upon a culture of shared organizational values and expectations and a commitment to investing in staff and operational effectiveness**
 - **This is true of all programs, including those serving SWDs**
- **The collective goal should be to ensure a focus on student needs and outcomes are at the center of decisions about resource allocation and Program implementation**
- **An inclusive culture provides a foundation for integrated programming and services, high-quality educational experiences for all students, and opportunity for equitable access to supports and resources**
 - **Parent engagement and inclusive practices to meet the needs of families and students are critical components of an inclusive culture**

Organizational Effectiveness (continued)

Outcomes

- The Department is equity- and student-centered and focused on high-quality educational services
- The Program staff and sites benefit from the extensive support from the Department leadership team and related services providers such as psychologists
- Clear Program policies and procedures exist, and roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and understood
 - Regular communication provides awareness of Program activities and alignment with District initiatives
- There is a need for professional development (PD) and inclusive capacity-building training for all District staff and administration
- Fidelity of implementation of universal design for learning and research-based curriculum in the general education classes is a critical need

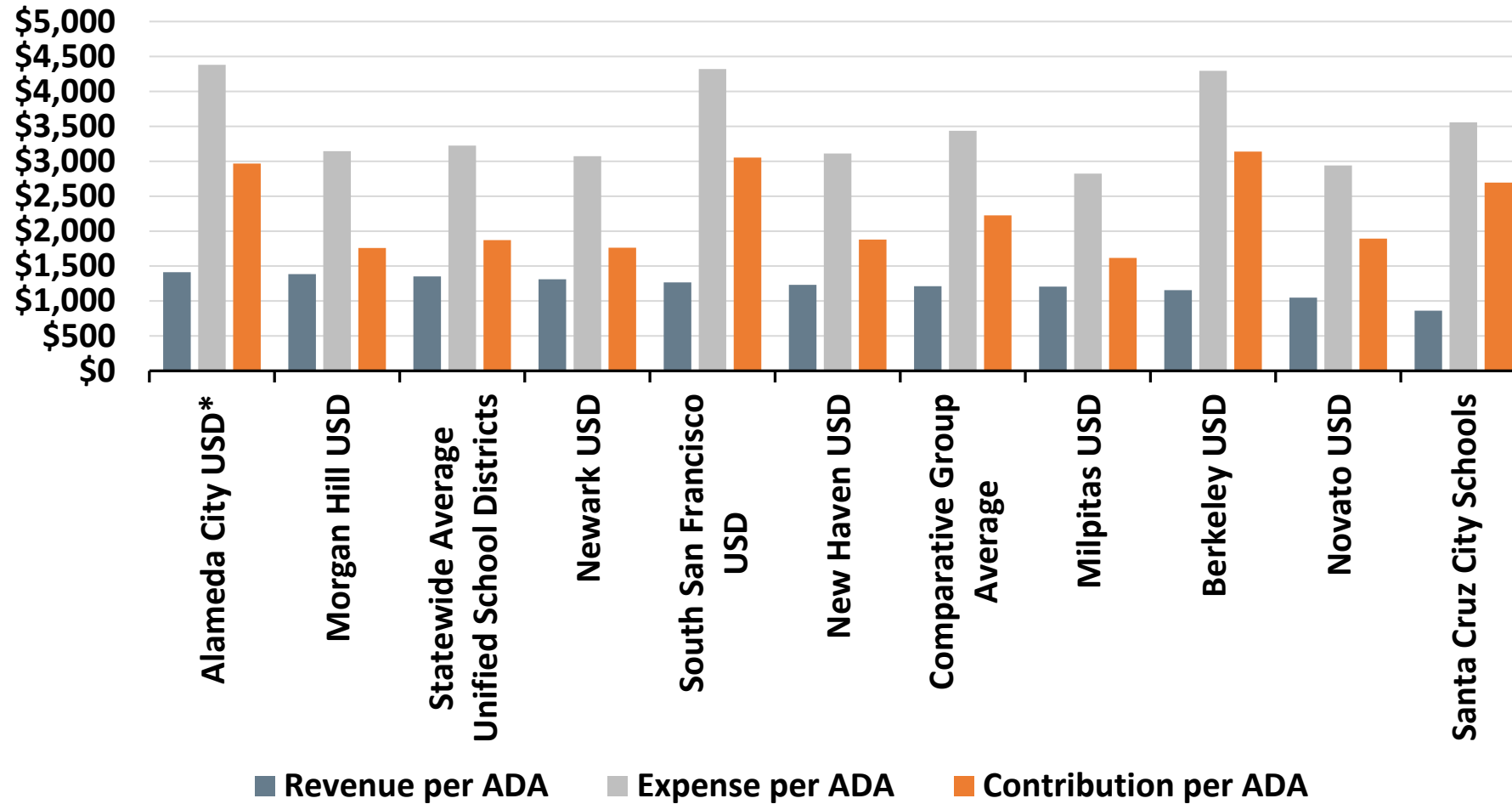
Recommendations

- **Establish clear policy, procedure, and communication protocols across the District**
- **Continue to reinforce, communicate, and consistently implement clear and concise Program policies and procedures**
- **Continue PD opportunities and expansion of needed behavioral and mental health services**
- **Take a more active role in the implementation and distribution of programs, including inclusive practices and access**
- **Assess the space needs of the Department and Program and develop long-term plans to support space and location needs**

Standards and Areas of Investigation

- The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has changed the way LEAs think about funding, as all students, including SWDs, generate funding to be used to provide base educational programs
- In understanding special education funding, LEAs should keep in mind that special education is not a “stand alone” program
 - It is meant to supplement the education offered to the general population of students and to assist SWDs in attaining the educational goals contained in their Individual Education Program (IEP)
 - Students in special education generate LCFF dollars first and those dollars should contribute to their educational program
 - LEAs are required to spend the same state and local dollars on SWDs as they do on all students before any special education dollars are spent
 - Services to any student—including SWDs—exclusive of IEP-required services are not a special education expense

Special Education Revenue and Expenditure

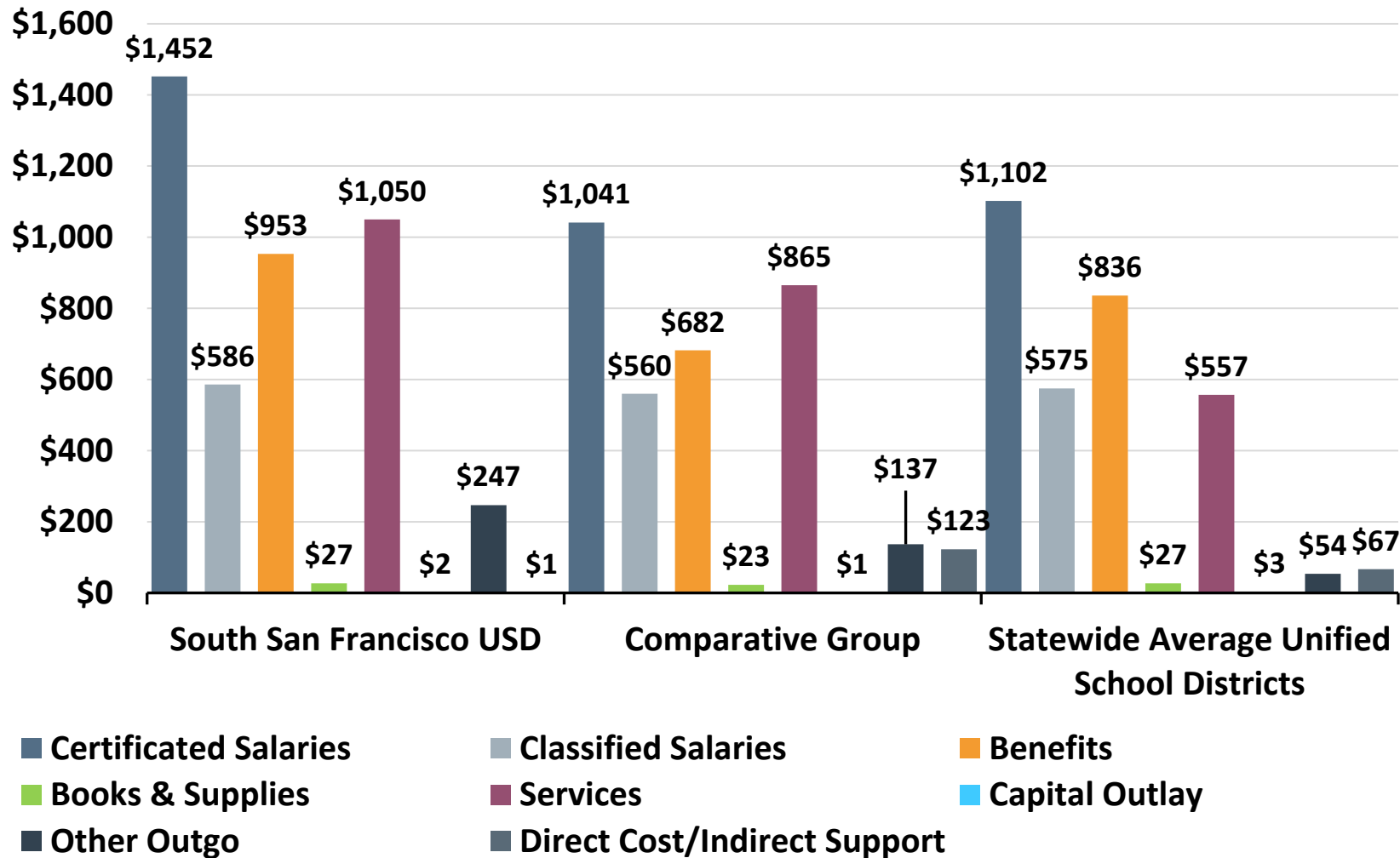


- District ranked the fourth highest in program revenue
- District ranked second highest in program expenditure and in contribution per average daily attendance (ADA)
- District revenue per ADA was \$1,267, the District per-ADA expenditure was \$4,321, and the per-ADA contribution was \$3,054

Source: Standardized Account Code Structure state-certified data

*Unified School District

Program Expenditure by Object per ADA



- The District spent 16.47% of its total budget on the Program, while SWDs make up 15.90% of the District students
- The statewide average for unified school districts spending is 10.26% to support 13.44% of the students
- Personnel salaries and benefits represent the largest share of Program expenditures at 69.00% compared to 78.00% for the statewide average
- Funding of services represents 24.00% of expenditure for the District as compared to 17.00% for the statewide average

Source: State-certified data

Special Education Revenue and Expenditure (continued)

Outcomes

- The District is spending more on Program services than the comparative districts and significantly more than the statewide average for unified school districts, but they also serve more SWDs proportionately
- The District spent more per ADA on personnel and contracted service providers combined than is typical statewide, driven primarily by the amount expended for contracted providers
- The District's contribution to special education is 16.46% of the total expenses, which is slightly higher than the percentage of students being served, which is 15.90%

Recommendations

- Develop a formalized and collaborative budget development and monitoring process aligned to the budget process followed by other departments, programs and sites
- Review the funding and work assigned for all Program staff, particularly those paid for using special education resources and goals
- Continue to implement and refine District transportation policies and procedures for SWDs
- Develop a plan for hiring full-time instructional aides to help with staff retention, improve turnover rates, and improve support for the Program with behavioral and instructional needs

Standards and Areas of Investigation

- **Staffing costs are driven by the number and types of students served by the District and by the programmatic choices made by the District. Data examined includes the number of students served as a percentage of total enrollment and the percentage of students served by disability**
- **Having an effective process of early intervention is a proven, fiscally responsible way to address the academic, behavioral, and/or social-emotional needs of students**
- **The use of research-based curriculum and interventions is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Every Student Succeeds Act prior to referral, and determination of eligibility, for special education**
- **MTSS is a critical component of ensuring the general education system is appropriately addressing the needs of all learners, providing access to intervention and prevention support, and reserving special education referral and assessment for those who are truly suspected of having a disability, not just learning differences**

Special Education Cost Drivers (continued)

Outcomes

- The District serves the highest population of SWDs in the comparative group at 15.90%. The average number of students receiving special education services in the comparative group is 11.97%.
- Except for Specific Learning Disability (SLD), the District rate of incidence by disability is similar to the comparison group. The rate of incidence for SLD is 42% and the comparable group is 34%.
- Referral data shows District referrals increased significantly in 2021-22 then decreased in 2022-23. 53% of referrals were initiated by parent requests, bypassing the student study team (SST) process.
- The District has embraced having an MTSS with academic and social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health components. There are several parallel support systems within the District on the positive behavior and mental health side and there is evidence of training and commitment to MTSS. While District staff believe a system of support is in progress, they indicated through interviews they do not believe these intervention strategies are consistent and fully implemented at all school sites.
- Site differences in practice, expectations, and implementation of MTSS and SST influence the number of special education referrals experienced.

Special Education Cost Drivers (continued)

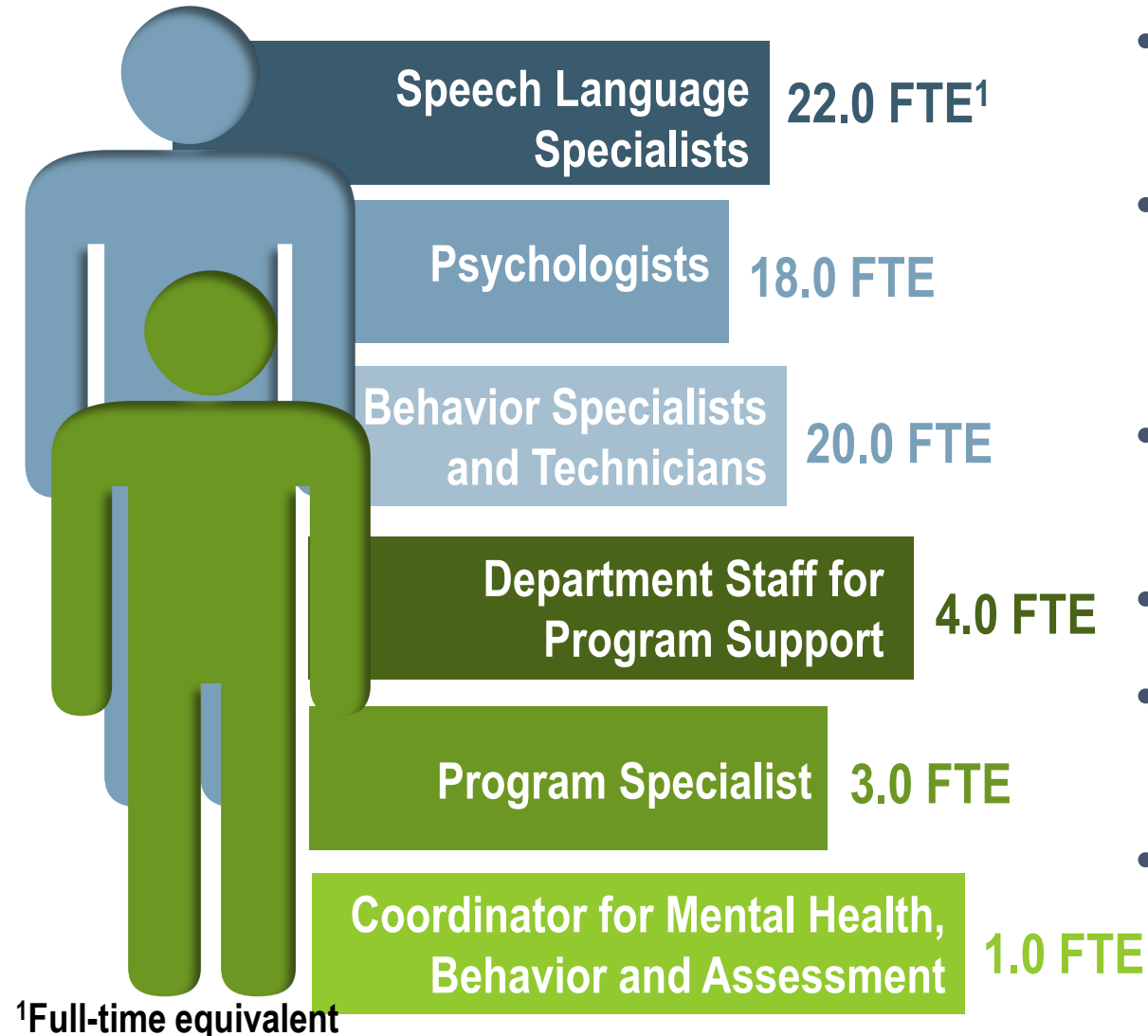
- **Special education referral and eligibility rates indicate current intervention practices are not effective in reducing referrals to special education.**
- **There are pervasive behavioral needs across the District which are impacting special education staff and increasing referral rates.**
- **Although the District employs many instructional aides, the skills and capacity of the staff to meet the intensive levels of physical and academic support for students should be monitored. Behavioral challenges, and the need for additional social-emotional support, indicate capacity building for staff to provide behavioral support is needed.**

Recommendations

- **Implement MTSS with fidelity**
- **Consider building capacity and extending the hours of staff to provide instructional and behavioral support**
- **Train staff to consistently implement an SST process and monitor the results of Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions as part of the MTSS**

Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing

Outcomes



- Appropriate staffing for related services specialists meet Program population needs
- Increased need for general education behavioral support was identified, alongside agreement the contracted behavior staff may not be meeting the need
- The Department has a team of five management staff and two classified staff to serve the Program needs
- Program Specialist roles are in high demand
- Vacancy at Assistant Director should be reworked into a Coordinator or Program Specialist role
- Time for onboarding, providing relevant training, and time for consultation with teacher and classified staff are priority needs

Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing (continued)

- Program teaching staff have reasonable caseloads within the average of the comparative group
 - Paraeducator staffing is within comparable LEA staffing range
 - A critical need for increased training and capacity building in the classified staff is noted
- One identified need is to provide consultation and planning time between paraeducators and teachers to grow the capacity to support student independence and educational goals
- District has two clerical/technical support staff members who handle all special education data monitoring, reporting, and alignment
- Tracking of contracted staff and overlap with vacancies is crucial

Recommendations

- Ensure monitoring and calibration of position control and position monitoring across the departments
- Provide relevant and appropriate onboarding, training, and capacity building to classified staff
- Develop and provide an in-house behavioral support program

Summary of Program Review

- The Department has a strong leader and a dedicated team and staff supporting a Program focused on continuous improvement and growth, including alignment with instructional practices identified in the Strategic Plan
- The District must evaluate the implementation of MTSS, and ensure the interventions, instructional practices, and curriculum meet the needs of all students, especially those of struggling learners to ensure special education is not the only option for intervention
- Site leaders and general education staff must hold shared responsibility for the teaching and learning of all students, including SWDs
- The District's mission to provide an inclusive environment for all learners through “exceptional instruction, engaging experience, and equitable and accessible opportunities and resources” requires the commitment of all levels of the system
- The Program and Department are valuable partners and critical components of meeting the needs of SWDs when the MTSS and general education program need support



Thank you!

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