

South San Francisco Unified School District

Special Education Study

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Executive Summary

Creating effective, high-quality special education programs is a concern for every district 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. At the same time, metrics for effective special education programs have shifted towards inclusive practices, equitable access, and student outcomes—measured by various mandated monitoring activities at the state and federal levels. Statewide pressures from staffing shortages and compliance monitoring to chronic absenteeism and learning recovery have amplified the challenges of running an effective and efficient program. Despite recent gains in special education funding, there remain substantial gaps between the funding provided to operate special education programs and the cost to provide services. Local educational agencies are facing rising costs due to a growing incidence of students with disabilities (SWDs), higher-cost services, and the need for increased employee compensation coupled with declining enrollment across the state.

The South San Francisco Unified School District (District) requested that School Services of California Inc. (SSC) review its Special Education Department (Department) and Program (Program) to offer an assessment and recommendations on how the District can improve the efficacy, fiscal sustainability, and efficiencies of its Program. The following is a summary of the major findings and recommendations that address:

- Organizational effectiveness and communication
- Special education revenues and expenditures
- Systemic cost drivers impacting special education
- Program management and staffing

Organizational Effectiveness and Communication

In assessing organizational effectiveness, SSC staff examined leadership and culture, organizational efficiency, and structure to assess the extent to which current staffing is adequate, roles and responsibilities are clear, and policies and procedures exist and are well communicated. The study also considers the impact of the general education program on special education via the provision of high-quality foundational teaching, opportunities for early prevention and intervention, and whether inclusive practices to support SWDs are organizational values.

In assessing the overall organizational structure and effectiveness, SSC staff found the Department staff to be knowledgeable; engaged with the community, students, and families; and focused on

implementing quality programming aligned with District initiatives. Overall, District staff are student-focused and place an emphasis on what is best for students and ensuring they are receiving educational benefit from their special education placements and services. A strength of the Department is the consistent use and analysis of data related to Program and student needs to guide service, placement, and support needs within the system.

The Program is an integral part of the District's broader educational environment, with efforts to ensure equitable access to curriculum, resources, and general education environments for SWDs. The Program is focused on implementing new curriculum, ensuring a robust professional development schedule, aligning processes and procedures, planning for upcoming Program needs, and utilizing staff and resources in alignment with the initiatives of the District. The Educational Services Department engages consistently with the Department leader, and there are activities and planning to ensure alignment of decision making, resources, and activities. Educational Services and Business Services differ in their approach and partnership with the Department, with business staff engaging with the Department primarily focused on the budgeting process and review of costs and expenditures. Fiscal responsibility must be the desired outcome for any department and program, while all systems need to balance the needs and priorities of the programs that are critical to the success of SWDs. In the District, one outcome of this dichotomy are Program and Department decisions that are approved by the Educational Services Department and communicated to Cabinet but are delayed while the Business Services Department gathers information or considers implementation actions. The District departments and department leaders must improve efforts to ensure consistency of communication, policy, practice, and procedure in a timely manner that will best serve the students in the Program.

Current structures place substantial responsibility for inclusive practices for SWDs on site staff and administration, which result in inconsistency in the level of inclusion throughout the District. The Department takes an active role in the development and distribution of programs, works collaboratively with school site administration and Educational Services to ensure Program needs are considered within the larger system and District-wide trends. However, challenges in communication, facilities plan alignment, and acquisition of appropriate resources for new classrooms have impacted Program needs, which may have fiscal implications in the long-term.

A strength of the Department is the policies and procedures related to Program implementation which are clearly communicated and implemented across the District, and effective communication practices among Department and Program staff, which ensures continuity, generates trust, and ensures implementation of Program functions. Program staff report an understanding of Department expectations, for information related to performing specific functions, and where to gain support. An identified need is for enhanced professional development for special education and general education teachers on behavior management, instructional strategies, and specifically on how to differentiate instruction to ensure all students remain in the general education environment to the maximum extent possible.

Special Education Revenues and Expenditures

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 Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Students in special education generate Local Control Funding Formula dollars, and those funds should contribute to their educational program—services exclusive of IEP-required services are not a special education expense. SWDs are entitled to the same standards of curriculum, technology, and resources as all other students as a General Fund expense.

The District was compared to eight similarly sized unified school districts, and it spends more on direct personnel and special education than the comparative group and the statewide average. The District spends more per average daily attendance in the “Services” category, which includes contracted services such as transportation, nonpublic schools, utilities, rents and repairs, or services from private vendors. The District’s overall and program expenses are second highest of the eight districts. Its revenues and General Fund contribution, as a percent of total special education expenses, are the third highest, falling above the group median. Overall, the District is spending more on special education relative to its student population.

The District has special education cases that have resulted in compliance complaints, mediation, settlement agreements, or litigation, with three current cases and four at the end of 2022-23. Most cases focused on the IEP offer and resulted in placements in nonpublic or private school settings or for private services, and many are for older students entering or attending high school or transition age programs. Ongoing monitoring of complaints, disagreements, and the resulting settlements to ensure patterns are identified early, training is provided for staff and administration, and preventative measures can be taken is recommended.

The previous study with SSC identified monitoring of transportation policy, procedure, practice, and provision of services as areas of potential improvement, with some recommendations related to location of specific programs to reduce the costs of transportation. Transportation services and expenditures should still be monitored to minimize costs to the program. One potential source of savings for the transportation program may be locating programs at different sites and serving students at their schools of residence in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Special Education Cost Drivers

In assessing Program and staffing, the statewide- and District-provided data related to SWDs was examined, including incidence of disability, percentage of disability compared to enrollment, and other state certified data points. The District was serving 1,434 SWDs on Census Day 2023-24 in its Program. There are 26 students receiving services in nonpublic schools, two students provided

residential treatment with nonpublic school services, 36 students placed in private schools by their parents with individualized services plans, and 93 students pending assessment.

The District has a higher percentage of students receiving special education services (15.90%) than the statewide average (13.44%). There are a variety of factors that can impact incidence of SWDs, and the District has patterns of lower incidence of some disabilities, and higher numbers in others. Further analysis is warranted to determine contributing factors to the higher-than-average incidence of some disabilities—which may be correlated with students being made eligible due to lack of appropriate reading and writing exposure, attendance challenges, and weaknesses in the District tiered intervention and early prevention strategies. An analysis of the pattern of referrals, the types of curricula, interventions, and challenges with which students are presenting, as well as regional factors that contribute to the higher-than-average rates, could provide areas for increased early prevention and intervention for the District.

While the District has established a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and staff believe systems are in development to help students in general education settings, the implementation of the pre-referral interventions may not be effective in keeping referrals to special education low. The District lacks strategies for ensuring all schools are implementing District-adopted and financially supported universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, and research-based intervention. The social, emotional, and behavioral support, while extensive, is reported to be insufficient to meet student needs, which may result in referrals for special education when services via an MTSS could potentially meet student needs.

SSC staff wants to acknowledge the District has instituted several programs and practices to provide early interventions, some co-teaching, incorporation of SWDs into the site and District MTSS, and support for students with emotional and behavior issues at many sites. However, expansion of social and emotional mental health resources and inclusive practices is needed to ensure Program capacity to place students in classes that meet the definition of LRE.

Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing

SSC staff conducted a comparative analysis of pupil personnel, related services staff, and Program and Department-level staff. Overall, the full-time equivalent pupil personnel and related services staff, as reported in the Personnel Data Report, is higher than the comparative group average for the job classifications reviewed. This increase in staffed positions aligns with the increased incidence of SWDs and the types of SWDs served by the District. There are some critical vacancies in the overall Department support, including at the administrative support and Assistant Director level. Given the ongoing pressure from sites, staff, and parents to increase classroom support, it may be that more instructional and behavioral support provided at sites and in classrooms via additional Program Specialists, teachers on special assignment, or behavioral teams would be more effective than an Assistant Director position.

Key Recommendations

To provide some direction as the District undertakes this endeavor, SSC staff has identified key recommendations below (the details on each recommendation can be found in the respective report section). These key recommendations are those SSC staff believe will have the greatest impact in improving efficiencies within the Program. However, these are only a handful of the total number included within this report. All recommendations have been summarized at the end of the report including notations regarding implementation timelines and those that, in SSC staff's determination, will have fiscal impacts. The District will need to consider the potential impact of costs, available revenues, and other demands on District budgets and plans during the prioritization of any implementation of study recommendations.

1. Establish clear policy, procedure, and communication protocols across the District related to Business Services and Human Resources mandates, requirements, and functions, especially as it pertains to collective bargaining agreements and Education Code, to ensure clarity of expectations and information about budgets for all departments (Organizational Effectiveness and Communication)
2. Develop a formalized and collaborative budget development and monitoring process, aligned to the budget process followed by other departments, programs and sites. (Special Education Revenue and Expenditure)
3. Working to expand and implement a high-quality in-house program of behavioral support, with a supervising Board-Certified Behavior Analysts and a cadre of District trained staff can improve student services, classroom, and site environments, and reduce the requests and need for contracted providers. (Special Education Cost Drivers and Comparative Staffing Analysis)

When considering the implementation of the recommendations, SSC staff urges the District to recognize implementation will happen incrementally with some recommendations building on others. A thoughtful redesign process, aligned with site resources and the buy-in of staff, would result in incremental implementation and provide more support for students in the appropriate environments. The development of a prioritization plan that considers costs, available revenues, staff resources, and feasible timeframes will assist in this endeavor. As part of its strategic planning, the District may consider starting with those recommendations with a lower fiscal impact, developing foundations upon which to further consider the expansion or development of Program support and services in alignment with other efforts and District initiatives.

Study Scope and Methodology

The South San Francisco Unified School District (District) requested School Services of California Inc. (SSC) review its Special Education Department (Department) and Special Education Program (Program) to offer recommendations on the District's status related to cost effectiveness and efficiency of its Program. This study uses a multifaceted approach to first review previous work and recent impacts on the Program to assist in understand the issues facing the Department and then recommend changes to help the District operate a cost-effective, high-quality, and legally compliant Program. This approach includes the following steps:

- Review of previously completed reports, assessments, studies or analyses
- Analysis of District-level data related to the Program, including financial information, pupil counts, class sizes, and caseloads
- Collection and analysis of state-certified data from districts of similar type and size to compare incidence of disability, staffing levels, and revenues and expenditures
- Interviews with District, Department, and site leadership, as well as Program staff

Review of Other Studies

The District has undertaken studies in areas of their organization, functioning, departments, and operations over the last five years. Two of these are relevant to this Program study:

1. Special Education Study by SSC (2017)
2. Compliance and Improvement Monitoring Activities and Plan

SSC completed a study of the Department and Program in 2017. At the time, substantial recommendations were provided focused on potential improvements across the Program, from the Department management to assignment of services and resources to sites and students. Key recommendations from the previous study, which are included in Appendix A, were reviewed for implementation status, current relevance, and consideration for ongoing recommendation.

Substantial implementation progress is noted across the Department and Program, and continued efforts in building capacity, providing professional development, ensuring appropriate staffing levels and Individualized Education Program (IEP) implementation, and communicating and enforcing quality policies and procedures are clearly observable in provided data. Many suggested action items came with fiscal impact, such as increasing Department and Program full-time equivalent (FTE) to support student and site needs, expanding capacity and training support, and implementing Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for all students through the general

education program. Some action items are still underway or in development, while others have been completed. The positive impact from staffing increases, while costly, is noted by staff and sites, as is the increased capacity of staff provided with continual training and capacity building activities. Finally, a very robust set of policies, procedures, a communication and resources hub, and access to data, training modules, and District information is available to interest holders and partners via a Department website.

Some recommendations from the previous study are in various stages of implementation, from those recently beginning, to those requiring ongoing, multi-year commitments by the District. The District has reengaged with MTSS, including improving core curriculum implementation, updated curricular options, and consistency across the system in teaching, early intervention, and progress monitoring for all students and staff. There have been commitments to provide training and capacity building knowledge for site administrators, teaching staff, and classified support providers. The impact of these recent action items will need to be monitored and considered, especially as the District moves into a new three-year cycle for the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and implements the Strategic Plan for the District's future.

The Department has engaged in extensive compliance and improvement monitoring of the special education programmatic components over the last five years. The Department continues to monitor student indicator data under the Special Education Plan, which has carried over since 2020. Additionally, there are data monitoring activities that include analysis of Program implementation and service delivery, student outcome and data indicators from the California School Dashboard (Dashboard), and monitoring related to disproportionality, placement, and identification. The Department's collaborative work in partnership with Educational Services, support from the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), and through the Differentiated Assistance process, are ensuring initiatives to improve student outcomes and decrease a reliance on special education as a primary intervention or prevention service.

Comparative Analysis

The collection and analysis of data from districts similar in size and demographics allows comparison of the resources, incidence of disabilities, and staffing costs to that of the District. Eight comparative unified districts were identified by SSC staff in consultation with the District, and there are three sections in this report for which comparative data is utilized.

1. Special Education Revenues and Expenditures and (2.) Special Education Cost Drivers—SSC staff accessed statewide data for incidence of disabilities, revenue, and expenses for additional comparisons in certain areas. This analysis was completed for the following eight comparative districts:
 - Alameda City Unified School District (USD)
 - Berkely USD
 - Milpitas USD
 - Morgan Hill USD
 - Newark USD
 - New Haven USD
 - Novato USD
 - Santa Cruz City Schools
3. Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing—Comparative staffing data is based on prior year Personnel Data Report (PDR) results submitted to the California Department of Education (CDE).

Background

The District is the largest K-12 district in San Mateo County serving approximately 7,868 students (as of October 2022 census day) from the city of South San Francisco, a small portion of San Bruno, and the Serramonte district of Daly City. The District is composed of nine elementary schools (transitional kindergarten TK]–5), three middle schools (6–8), three high schools (9–12), an adult school and preschool (Pre–K).

The District, like other Bay Area districts, is challenged by the regional high costs of living and declining enrollment: from the 2015–16 school year to 2022–23, the District's enrollment has declined by over 1,000 students. In the 2022–23 school year, the District committed to engaging its school community to provide appropriate support and services and received survey results from over 3,700 community partners and 200 people attended community input meetings. The information gathered was used to guide the Strategic Plan. The 2023–24 LCAP demonstrates the District is striving to meet the needs of students with the resources provided by state and federal sources. The LCAP is clearly written and includes commitments to literacy, attendance, college and career readiness, and social-emotional learning, and incorporates the needs of students with disabilities (SWDs) in many of the activities and initiatives of the District.

The LCAP has multiple actions in four goals aligned to focus on student success and outcomes:

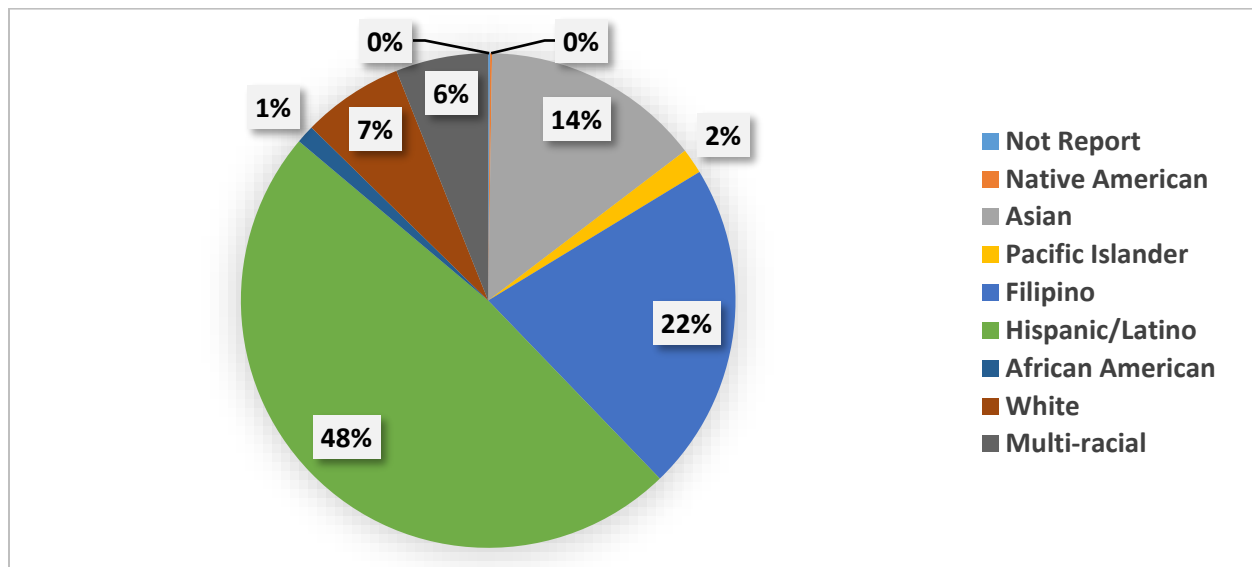
1. The District will provide a high-quality educational program that focuses on raising the academic achievement and social learning environment for all students. A primary area of focus is the curricular program to ensure that it is coherent and aligned across the District.
2. Identified classified staff, certificated and administrative staff will participate in professional development trainings that will assist in preparing students for college, career, and lifelong

readiness and/or provide ongoing support for learning and growth within the profession to increase skills to better support all students.

3. The District will increase student, parent and community engagement and support programs that foster a stronger, more positive, connection between school and home.
4. The District will provide a high-quality curricular program for SWDs that will raise student engagement in school and proficiency on the Common Core State Standards as measured by overall academic achievement on state assessments, and engagement rates. This goal was recently added with major components to include:
 - Improving achievement through access to rigorous curriculum and academic support
 - Continuing to build a continuum of services and internal capacity to support students
 - Professional development for teachers and staff on topics including culturally appropriate restorative practices, transition planning and IEP goal setting, co-teaching, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model.

State-certified data indicates the District is diverse and serves a broad range of students from various ethnicities, shown in Figure 1, and representing the student groups that are monitored via the Dashboard, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Racial and Ethnic Makeup of District Students



Source: 2021-22 state-certified data

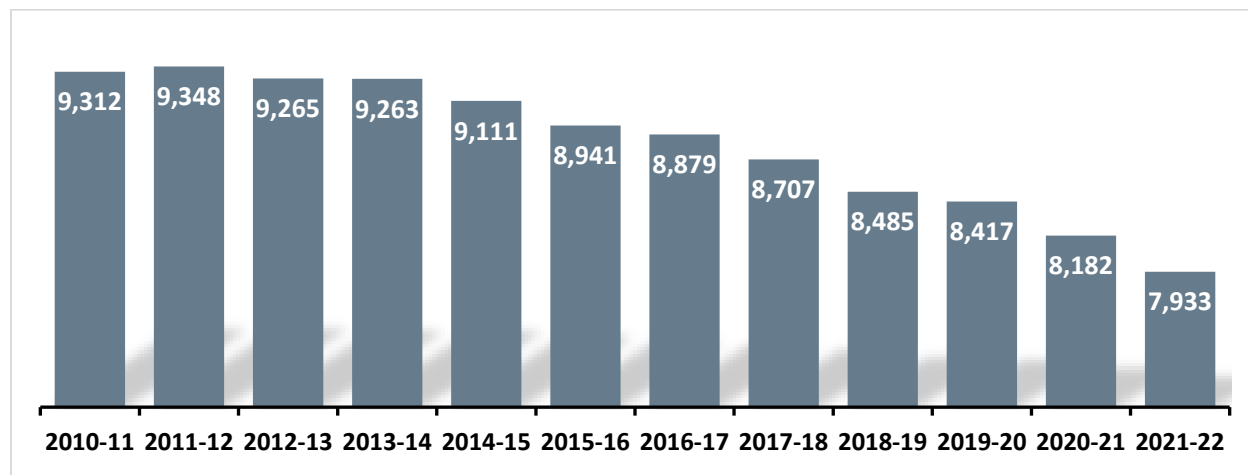
Figure 2: Student Groups

Student Group	Total	Percentage
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	3,159	40.1%
English Learners	1,864	23.7%
Foster Youth	16	0.2%
Homeless	151	1.9%
SWDs (ages 6-22 only)	1,250	15.9%

Source: 2023 Dashboard

The District has experienced steady declines in enrollment over the last decade, and experienced a significant decrease in enrollment since 2020-21, which may reflect the influence of the pandemic and increasing regional costs for housing. The reported 2021-22 enrollment of 7,933 represents the lowest enrollment in the past decade, and the average daily attendance (ADA) has been impacted by chronic absenteeism as well. Declining enrollment and lower ADA dramatically impact revenues for districts, as funding is tied directly to student enrollment and attendance Figure 3 shows student enrollment over the past 12-year period for the District.

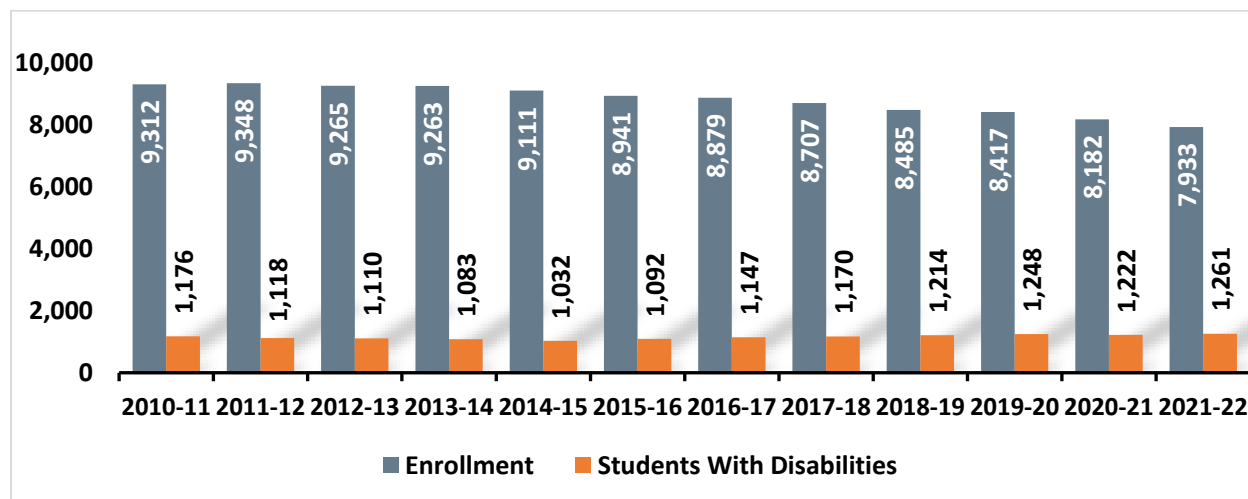
Figure 3: Enrollment



Source: State-certified data

As total enrollment decreases, the number of SWDs should decrease at a level proportionate to overall enrollment decline. During periods of declining enrollment, enrollment of SWDs may or may not decrease at the same rate depending on where the change in enrollment is occurring (e.g., Pre-K and elementary) and can be erratic until enrollment levels off. To make a comparison between fluctuations in enrollment and SWDs, both sets of data are needed. Although 2022-23 enrollment data is available for the District, the most recent SWD data is from 2021-22. For this reason, Figure 4 displays enrollment and SWDs through 2021-22. The change in the number of SWDs in the District has not occurred in coordination with the decreases in enrollment, and the number of SWDs has been on an overall upward trend between 2014-15 and 2019-20, with a decrease in 2020-21 that is likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

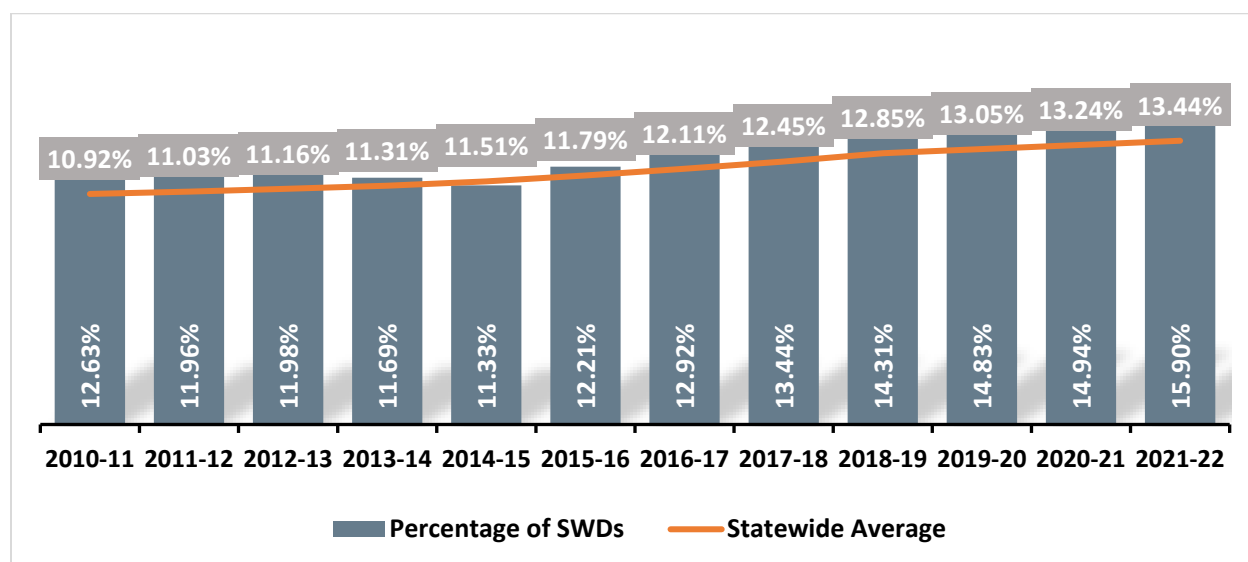
Figure 4: Enrollment Compared to Number of SWDs



Source: State-certified data

The District's percentage growth in SWDs has seen a steady increase since 2014-15, as illustrated in Figure 5, which is consistent with overall increases in the statewide average. However, the District has a consistently higher percentage of SWDs than the statewide average.

Figure 5: Percentage of SWDs (Ages 0-22) and Statewide Average



Source: State-certified data

It is important for Program staff to conduct similar comparisons annually to ensure Program components, such as existing assessment and identification practices, are implemented and monitored consistently and with fidelity. Consistent monitoring of Program practices and patterns can assist in predicting changes in service needs for appropriate program planning.

Organizational Structure and Effectiveness

The ability to provide effective instructional programs—that meet the needs of students in the most cost-effective manner—is dependent upon a strong culture where organizational values and expectations are shared and there is a commitment to investing in employees and operational effectiveness. This is true of all programs, including those serving SWDs.

In assessing organizational effectiveness, SSC staff looked at leadership and culture, organizational efficiency, and organizational structure while asking the following questions:

1. How have duties been assigned to the Program and does the current level of staffing meet existing service demands?
2. Is the inclusion of SWDs an organizational value and/or expectation that is widely held; and what impact, if any, does this have on productivity, operational efficiency, and personal and organizational satisfaction?
3. Are the roles and responsibilities of District and school site staff appropriately allocated and clearly defined?
4. Do current policies and procedures ensure operational efficiency and support effective program delivery?
5. Are roles and responsibilities, as well as policies and procedures, well communicated; and are there systems of accountability to ensure consistency across the District?

Leadership and Culture

Leadership and organizational culture play a pivotal role in a district's ability to achieve established goals. The collective attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals and groups within any organization, and the traditions and norms they share, determine its culture. A strong organization is one where organizational values and expectations are clearly communicated and aligned across the interest holders of the organization, resulting in a productive and operationally efficient organization with strong personal and organizational satisfaction. Leaders are responsible for shaping and nurturing a culture that supports the ongoing growth and development of the organization and its most valuable asset—its employees.

The District has many strengths and has focused its efforts on systemic improvement and implementation of key initiatives. Every leader interviewed indicated the positive, collaborative, and student-focused partnerships in the District, and the systemic pride in the efforts, actions, and initiatives of the District is well deserved. The Department staff bring substantial assets of knowledge and experience to the system and opportunities exist to continue to strengthen

procedures, implement programs, and provide SWDs with equitable access to educational opportunities and inclusive practices. The District's overall attitude towards SWDs influences the organizational culture of the Program. This is clear when reviewing the District's LCAP and can be seen in the professional development calendar—both District-wide and site based—where special education topics have been included for all staff.

SSC staff found the District and Department to have a strong student-focus with a collective goal of equitable access for all students and an emphasis on the importance of quality instruction, well trained educators, and targeted support for all students. The newest District goal—ensuring SWDs are provided rigorous curriculum in the general and special education environments—aligns with the overall goal of improving best practice and core curricular pedagogy, with a renewed focus on early intervention and prevention. These continued commitments to the achievement and outcomes of students should be influencing Program availability and services to students, but there is still room for growth in this area.

The Department has expanded the number of program specialists, managers, psychologists, and teachers on special assignment (TOSA) providing support throughout the system. At some sites (high schools and Pre-K, for example) there are lead support providers. However, even with increases in managerial and supervisory support, the Department leaders cannot resolve all challenges nor be in all places. The Department staff feel pulled in competing directions, strive daily to meet the needs of students, families, staff, and sites, but often find there is insufficient time and resources to respond to every need. No department is likely to ever meet all the demands of its system, but support from the system, inclusive of site leaders and other District departments, is crucial to ensure the smooth functioning of programs and classrooms. Currently, there is a vacancy in the Department leadership team, which impacts the Program and services.

The Director of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services (Director) has served for over five years and colleagues indicate the Director led the Department with professionalism, grace, and excellence during transitions, improvements, and growth in the Department. Staff and District leadership consistently expressed gratitude for her creativity, consistency of support, and student-centered, equity focus. The Director has outlined multi-year plans to develop the Program, align resources to sites and student needs, and expand offerings to be responsive to student needs in a fiscally responsible manner. There is a systemic expression of pride in the improvements and shared vision of the Program, and acknowledgement that Department leaders are running on fumes, supporting site leaders burdened with site responsibilities, and depending on Program staff that need ongoing training and support. The Department is commended on their progress, planning, and perseverance, and is encouraged to periodically take stock of what is underway, what may need to be faded or set aside as new demands and responsibilities are incorporated into the work of the Program, and to explicitly outline the support needed from District leadership.

Many schools report including SWDs with general education peers and place them in less restrictive environments, when possible, but these determinations are made at the site level. The Cost Drivers section will discuss Program options and placements in more detail, but the site-specific implementation and assignment of Program services, personnel, and practices may not align with systemic goals and initiatives. The Department staff engage when a situation rises to a level where greater involvement is needed (e.g., due process complaints or other legal action), but given the number of sites, the ability to provide hands-on, day-to-day support is limited. A site administrator's responsibilities, including holding staff accountable (e.g., review of lesson plans or student files, teacher effectiveness, etc.) and ensuring site programs are operating as designed, can be difficult and can be a lower priority. This lack of prioritization at the site results in inconsistent service quality, limited accountability, coaching, and mentoring provided, and the programs dependent on the site team experience and capacity in many cases.

Communication

Regular, clear, and consistent communication is the foundation of a strong department and program. With a clear understanding of the direction, procedures, and goals of a program, staff are certain about responsibilities, roles, and requirements and expectations are understood. Communication is critical to ensuring timely sharing of information, clarity regarding decision-making, as well as establishment of policies, practices, and procedures for the staff. Quality communication smooths relationships, ensures people feel heard and respected, and allows for transparency and accountability of decisions and messages. Interviews and observations during SSC staff's visit reveal there are effective communication protocols in place for the Department and Program staff, including multiple formats for connection and communication. There are opportunities for individualized and site level support from the Department, and the Director provides a variety of methods to ensure all members of the staff receive critical information.

There are two levels of communication critical to the success of the Department: internal—inclusive of Program staff assigned to school sites or itinerant; and external—between the Department and other departments as well as school site administration. As it pertains to “internal” communications, staff noted there are opportunities for collaborative discussion across the Department. For example, the Director meets regularly with the Program staff to discuss the Program and develop strategy for its operations and implementation. The Department team has relationships with site staff and administrators and staff are comfortable reaching out as needed. Further, the pupil personnel services staff are visible at school sites and are available to answer questions and provide support for any Program need.

The Department has quality communication channels in place to disseminate information, and clear documentation is available on the website for reference and resources. Regular communication for information sharing, resources, and professional development is important, as well as providing staff with the opportunity to ask questions and share feedback. The Director has

established structured and consistent communication channels so all staff receive the same message, and continued reinforcement of the importance of these communications will be important. The key is to make staff aware of the medium and ensure it is consistently referenced so it is embedded in the District culture. The Department convenes all-staff meetings, when possible, to provide professional development, set expectations, provide updates, etc.

Related to “external” communication, communication between the Department and Education Services, and with the school sites, is important to ensure the work of the Program is aligned with District goals, plans, and requirements. Currently, the Department supports the professional development calendar to include pivotal capacity building and training related to special education topics and in support of the District MTSS initiatives. The Department continues to provide support and training for the Section 504 Plans and coordinators and has provided support for ensuring Student Study Team (SST) meetings are more than just a pathway to special education assessment. Regular cross-departmental meetings and combined professional development support quality communication and a seamless educational experience for SWDs. The inclusion of Program-related information by the Department as part of District meetings for administrators and leadership, along with school site meetings, is important to provide Program and general education staff a greater understanding of the Program.

Policies and Procedures

Policies are the rules, principles, and guidelines used to reach the goals of an organization. Procedures are the steps to support those policies. Well-communicated policies and procedures facilitate consistency and support operational efficiency. Policies and procedures are the link between the core mission and the day-to-day operations and answer the “What?” and “How?” of an individual’s or group’s assigned work. Written policies and procedures allow employees to understand their roles and responsibilities, while allowing management to guide operations without constant intervention. Well-written policies and procedures:

- Ensure consistent implementation of effective practices
- Increase efficiencies
- Reduce potential errors and mitigate risks
- Allow managers to hold employees accountable to predetermined standards

A good policy is explicit in nature and will offer clear and concise direction to staff, though it must not be so rigid or out-of-date as to not offer discretion to management. Most importantly, policies are not effective if not communicated and implemented with fidelity. Clear procedures are critical to a district’s ability to provide defensible programs.

The District is currently straddling the dual challenges of expanding and improving its educational programs and offerings, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on sustainability and fiscal responsibility. As the District leadership has learned, expansion of programs and shift in practice can require substantial resources, both during the ramp up and the implementation portion of activities. The District has made investments in the Program over the past few years, many of which were recommended and needed to ensure appropriate and compliant service delivery. However, this report will provide several examples where the needs and priorities of the Department, which are critical to the success of SWDs, are encountering barriers from other departments. The costs and resources to reorganize and implement the Program are, at times, in conflict with the fiscal monitoring required by Business Services and operational considerations requested by the Department may not always align with other systemic needs of the District.

The District has experienced transitions in their leadership positions and combined with the universal challenges of the past few years there are opportunities for the system to improve practices and procedures. Every system must have foundational policies and procedures, for the District and within departments, to support the systemic expectations and requirements of each program. While separate from the Program policies and procedures reviewed for this study, it became clear during interviews the District needs to review, update, and ensure clear written procedures and protocols are in place for communications and actions across departments. Improved communication related to Business Services and Human Resources (HR) mandates, requirements, and functions, especially as it pertains to collective bargaining agreements, Education Code requirements, or local decision making was noted as being a need for the District. Focus is needed to ensure clarity of Business Services and HR expectations as related to the activities of the Program, as there are often decisions and actions needed on short notice based on student needs, IEP determinations, or site crises, and without time to consult, the Department should understand how to move forward in an authorized manner.

As it pertains to Program policies and procedures specific to special education operations, staff know policies exist, and most identified the effectiveness of the Department website in sharing the resources needed by Program staff. As the staff in the Program has grown, the skills and abilities of individuals in managing Program operations has been incorporated into written operational standards and formal policies and procedures, which has increased role clarity, understanding of expectations, and common language across the staff. SSC staff received copies of policies and procedures and access to the website, and it appears the policies and procedures are consistently followed Program wide. The documents included in the policies and procedures are thorough and compliant with updated Education Code statutes, appear to be consistently updated, and are available on the Department website.

Lastly, while not a policy, language included within the collective bargaining agreement impacts the Program and has greater force than many policies and procedures. The Director should be involved/consulted in negotiation agreements which impact the Program's ability to offer a

comprehensive continuum of program options and/or meet least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements for SWDs. For example, the collective bargaining agreement with the teachers' union requires a classified assistant for SWDs with extensive support needs to be provided, along with training for the teacher prior to full inclusion starting, which may be a barrier for student access. Additionally, there is a limit of two students deemed to be "full inclusion" for any regular education class, which limits inclusive opportunities for SWDs. The language for full inclusion does not reference the needs of students with less intensive support needs, but interviews made it clear there are insufficient opportunities for inclusive access and mainstreaming at many sites. According to the Department data provided, only 13 programs are regularly providing access via a "hybrid" model of instruction, which may include co-teaching or inclusive practices. Each school site, with their teachers and site leader, can determine if it will offer this as a service option and to what degree; a decision-making responsibility that may not ensure alignment with District and Department goals and initiatives.

Roles and Responsibilities

Role clarity is a prerequisite for organizational effectiveness along with individual and/or team performance. For an organization or department within an organization to succeed, employees and leaders need to not only know their jobs and perform them well, but they also need to understand their role as a part of the larger team. Leaders are often tasked with multiple roles, some of which overlap or require collaborative communication and engagement with members of cabinet and the superintendent. Ensuring all members of the District leadership team are receiving the information, communication, and support needed to implement the functional duties of their position becomes a critical part of the partnership when there are only a handful of people to ensure all the requirements of the District are met. Interviews indicated some communication and partnership channels are strong and consistent, while others may benefit from enhancement and formalized agendas, goals, and outcomes.

Employees also need to understand the roles of those they work with, and the role leaders play and how each supports the other. Role clarity can eliminate duplication of effort as well as ensure essential tasks are not overlooked. The benefits of gaining role clarity are numerous, including increased efficiencies, improved individual and group performance, and job satisfaction. Role ambiguity can be a source of stress for individuals, teams, programs, and organizations. This does not apply solely to District employees. Role clarity is just as important for contracted service providers. For contracted staff paid by the hour for specific work, the specificity and clarity of the contract and the supervision and oversight by District staff are critical to ensuring the benefit of the services are appropriate to the cost. Program staff report a clear understanding of the roles of Department leadership and feel confident they can obtain the support and know where to request support. Contracted staff in some related services positions reported clarity of their obligations, where to obtain direction, and the expectations for their services to students and sites. However, some contracted positions were systemically noted as confusing for personnel, Program staff, and

site administrators. Clearer definition for site staff and administrators of their role in directing and supervising the work of contracted providers of classified services may need to be reviewed.

Site administrators are expected to take a great deal of responsibility and ownership for the needs of the students at their schools. They play a significant role in the supervision of programs and are engaged with parents, students, and staff to ensure all students receive what is needed for their academic and personal success. There is a sense of community among staff interviewed and at the schools visited. The school administrators place a lot of trust in the site-level Program staff, allowing them discretion and independence in implementing Program activities. As previously discussed, the responsibilities of the Department in collaboration with the site administration should be examined. SSC staff recommends the Department be provided with greater ability to adjust programs and where they are located, in collaboration with sites and in alignment with the facilities plan. Additionally, as part of the systemic professional development provided to District administrators, clarity of Department and District expectations about site continuum of inclusive practices, access, and service delivery should be provided to site leaders.

Professional Development

Staff reported that despite the dramatic expansion of trainings and support offered in the past several years, there is an ongoing need for professional development (PD) and capacity building for special education and general education staff and administrators, especially for newly hired educators. The Department has utilized their resources, including the leadership members, pupil personnel and related services specialists, cross-departmental partners, and support from the SELPA and county office to develop and provide trainings to support implementation of quality curriculum, instruction, and appropriate intervention for all students. It is important for special and general education teachers to receive training specific to District provided curriculum and materials, special education inclusive practices, strategies to support all students, and opportunities to learn about District policies and procedures.

The Department offers PD via behaviorists, staff, psychologists, and TOSAs to assist new teachers and general education and Program staff. However, given the substantial number of new educators and the need for reengagement with the MTSS initiative, it may be the amount of support is still insufficient to meet the system's needs. There are multiple critical initiatives underway, such as having the correct curriculum and instructional materials for students challenged by reading difficulties and dyslexia, a new math intervention, a focus on UDL, inclusive practices, and ensuring available accommodations and modifications by classroom teachers to benefit all students. The TOSAs are working to support new educators to ensure they can navigate the focus on teaching and IEP compliance, writing, and Program compliance. Some school sites increase support by utilizing a teacher on full-day release to mentor and assist newer educators, and/or general education teachers who are working with SWDs.

The Department shared a lengthy list of provided and/or scheduled capacity building and training available for administrators, general education, and Program staff. However, the staff shared there is limited time during the workday to receive coaching on needed topics and a lack of substitutes to relieve them even if time were not a factor. This is of particular concern because all training outside of contract hours is voluntary, so even when the District offers to pay for the time, some staff do not attend and are then unable to provide the needed support for students. Several staff noted they have not been trained in a specific topic but had the opportunity to attend PD after hours and chose not to attend. Finding time and resources for PD can be a challenge, and a multiyear plan will continue to be necessary to meet all District staff's needs. SSC staff recommends the consideration of online training modules available for a myriad of topics—from the mandated topics covered each year for all employees to the specific job-related topics for Program and general education staff. This can be a cost-effective option that provides staff with the flexibility to participate when it works for their schedules.

The District has components of a MTSS, which includes providing accommodations and interventions for students in the general education environment prior to referral for special education. As discussed later in this report, MTSS is a District-wide initiative that, to be successful, requires universal adoption and alignment of definition, planning, and implementation by the general education program. MTSS components are frequently overseen by Educational Services, as there are substantial curriculum and instructional components, while the discipline and wellness components may be supported by Student Services personnel. However, there is evidence of inconsistency, site level differences in implementation and quality of instructional practices, and data showing site differences in referrals and services offered to students struggling with learning. There is a measurable impact on students when the general education program is missing components of MTSS, such as being referred for special education rather than provided with support via the MTSS. Implementation of the recommendations in this report will have limited success without PD for all educators that does not come at the cost of site meetings, training, or collaboration time. The District has developed a PD calendar to provide targeted PD for all staff, and time is provided for regular special education meetings with various Program staff.

Department staff shared there have been trainings and consultation related to the implementation of the SST process, the mandated documentation of prereferral interventions, and the requirements for all teachers to implement appropriate modifications and accommodations for SWDs. However, there are reported differences between sites and grade levels, and the lack of consistency in expectations and requirements for implementation amongst site leaders does result in over assessment of students, referral for resources, such as behavioral support that should be provided by the general education system. There is a reported expectation amongst general education staff that special education is going to “resolve” the challenges students are experiencing, whether they are identified SWDs or not. It is apparent there are opportunities for improvement when it comes to coordination of base instructional practice with the MTSS identified prevention and early intervention components available for all students.

This need for coordination is particularly clear about the behavioral needs of students. SSC staff learned general education teachers receive limited training on strategies and interventions to assist students before they are referred to special education, nor training on behavioral strategies for students with social, emotional, and mental health needs. The District has worked to incorporate trauma informed thinking, social-emotional learning (SEL), and restorative practices in some schools, yet has had limited time to ensure all educators are trained and comfortable with this work. This type of PD becomes increasingly important as student needs become more challenging, and inclusion becomes more common. As will be discussed later in this report, the District should continue building out the range of behavioral and SEL support available at all grade levels, as improved resources and support at the elementary levels may reduce the need for intensive or crisis level resources at the higher grades. Every level of staff, from site leaders to classroom teachers noted a need for more behavioral and mental health support, with many citing available resources for students in general education would serve a preventative purpose rather than having all students with these types of needs being referred for special education assessment and support. There have been investments in this support, and a full MTSS of resources is under development, but a priority for the District should be to ensure more of behavioral supports are being provided by general education mental health and behavioral practitioners to relieve pressure on the overburdened special education pupil personnel services cohort.

Other Program Components

Other factors which influence the organizational effectiveness of the Department and Program include needs that will require systemic response, collaboration across departments, and the engagement of site leaders to take on and tackle site needs independently or in partnership with the Department leadership. Relevant issues of evaluation and location are outlined below.

Data Compliance and Monitoring

The statewide system for tracking student data—California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS)—was recently updated and special education data systems were required to align with the CALPADS reporting process. This transition has seen challenges, as the systems align terminology, practice, and documentation for state and federal reporting. Alignment of special education data with the required reporting components in CALPADS used to be a task of a few weeks around census day and at the end of the year. Now, the CDE is using information uploaded and integrated into CALPADS to perform compliance monitoring activities, which requires districts to maintain strict schedules of data upload and alignment. The CALPADS to special education data system process can be a full-time job, with high stakes for funding, compliance, and reporting. Many districts need to align job descriptions and assignments with the increased demands placed on the special education department.

The District team, consisting of a veteran administrative assistant, an onboarding clerical technician, and a vacancy in a third position is developing their new partnership to support the Program. The veteran staff member providing onboarding, with the support of the SELPA, is knowledgeable and the Special Education Information System (SEIS) dashboard shows the impact of their communication and coordination. Many districts have struggled with the CALPADS transition, but the Department support provides excellent customer service and support to the special education team members, as exemplified by the many available searches in the system that can be used by administrators and staff to monitor their own students, caseloads, and systemic data points. The team acts as a line of defense to ensure IEP documents are complete and the staff completing IEPs has the information and solutions needed to ensure IEP documents are compliant with state-level data requirements. An excellent example is a Department checklist available that provides explicit information on how to avoid the most common errors and challenges in alignment across the SEIS-CALPADS systems. These types of written resources are excellent for veteran and new team members, ensure consistency, and provide a reference to users of the system.

Physical Space

An area where impacts to organizational effectiveness was noted was related to the physical space and location of personnel, teams, and support staff, as well as access to appropriate physical space at school sites to deliver services, confidentially engage in assessment and consultation activities, and to ensure access for students to inclusive environments. Multiple sites reported challenges with assignment of space, with many Program practitioners needing to share space for assessment, consultation, and service delivery. While this may be possible when staff are itinerant and support multiple sites, many of the sites have providers who are assigned to the location daily, which makes sharing of space particularly challenging when delivering special education services. Additionally, the itinerant staff who are remaining in the system have, at many sites, no assigned space, shared or not, where they can complete their work. Sites and staff describe weekly attempts to find a corner of a library, multi-purpose room, or shared spaces to engage with and assess students. Staff report they use outdoor spaces when possible, scheduling times in other offices to complete assessments, and participation in virtual consultation meetings from their cars in the parking lot. These scarcity of space issues have a direct impact on the job satisfaction and effectiveness of staff and their delivery of services. The sites and system should develop a protocol for ensuring prior communication and planning about use of space and ensuring staff can effectively complete their work with students. A review of all itinerant staff access to space, from service providers to Program support staff is recommended, along with collaborative planning with facilities, site leaders, and the Department to develop a plan of action to ensure students can receive their services in appropriate and safe spaces on campuses.

Finally, although there may be no ideal resolution, the location of the Department leadership team, spread across several sites, inhibits effective and efficient Program operations. Housing the Director and Department administrative team at the District office supports collaborative

engagement with Education Services and District leaders. However, having the Department leaders who support the Program, general education staff, and site administrators, separated from the Director is resulting in inefficiencies of communication, and hinders the capacity of the Director to provide the regular and incidental support needed by those implementing challenging programs. The Director provides support and mentoring, as well as engages with the Program leaders to express gratitude and respect from the District and parent community, but some feedback may be less targeted or timely than needed. Prevention of leadership burnout can rely heavily on the support of management, and Program leaders are currently feeling isolated due to their worksite location and overwhelming demands of the work. The Director may need to consider if being co-located with the Department leaders is a higher priority than being located closer to the District office, even though this could put more pressure on the Director position to engage with District leadership partners on a regular basis.

Summary of Organizational Structure and Effectiveness

In assessing the overall organizational structure and effectiveness, SSC staff found that Department and many Program staff bring substantial assets to the Program which provides the District opportunities to provide greater support and programs to its students. A tremendous amount of collaboration, planning, implementation, and progress was noted during interviews with District and Program staff and leaders. The level of student and equity focused work described and under ongoing implementation is impressive, with much more to achieve and monitor. The alignment of the Department and the District initiatives, especially in the areas of high-quality instruction and use of curricular materials, the implementation of interventions and supplementary resources for struggling learners, and the consistency across the Program in available resources and training were consistency communicated. There is much to highlight as strengths and achievements, while ongoing transitions, plans, and monitoring of progress are underway. SSC staff found that the Director has a sharp vision of where the Department needs to be headed, and methods and strategies to get there in sustainable and responsible ways.

As with any system, there are areas for continued focus and growth in the areas of communication, alignment of practice and policy, and engagement across departments, and not isolated to the Program or Department alone. Many of the plans and actions will have fiscal and personnel impacts, and the Director's creativity has enabled many actions to move forward. However, the District needs clearly communicated and adherence to policy, procedure, and practice to ensure the adjustments to meet the needs of the Program are completed in alignment with District priorities, initiatives, resources, and under the appropriate decision-making parameters involving the Business, HR, and Education Services Departments. The operational effectiveness and efficiency of the Department is high, but the staff providing this support are strained and wearing thin. There are many critical efforts being supported by the Program staff, including PD related to behavioral management, implementation of UDL under an MTSS model, and strategies to support

students in the general education environment. The District should analyze on an ongoing basis the demands on the Department and Program to ensure the well-being, balance, and capacity of the staff are supported and acknowledged.

Recommendations—Organizational Structure and Effectiveness

1. **Establish clear policy, procedure, and communication protocols across the District.** While Departmental policy and procedure are well documented, District policy, procedure, and practice related to Business Services and HR mandates, requirements, and functions are needed to ensure clarity of expectations and information about budgets for the Department to have the same access and understanding as all department leaders.
2. **Continue to reinforce, communicate, and consistently implement clear and concise policies and procedures.** Well-communicated policies and procedures facilitate consistency across the organization and support operational efficiency and the effective delivery of programs. The Program policies and procedures ensure roles, responsibilities, and expectations are clear, and the availability of these resources increases efficiency and consistency. The Director may need to reinforce training and systems of accountability to ensure policies and procedures are implemented consistently.
3. **Continue PD opportunities and expansion of behavioral and mental health services.** The District should continue the multiyear training plan to provide the following:
 - The roles, responsibilities, and supervision of contracted services staff
 - The expectations for utilizing adopted resources and materials in general education settings
 - Expectations for Program staff, including IEP compliance monitoring, progress reporting, and Education Code mandated activities
 - Behavior management basics and alignment with LCAP SEL initiatives
 - UDL and components of an effective MTSS
 - Effective partnership strategies for an inclusive service delivery model
4. **Take a more active role in the implementation and distribution of programs, including inclusive practices and access.** In collaboration with site leaders, the continuum of services implemented at the sites is a Department responsibility, as it must ensure compliance with law, and the expectation of students are being educated in the LRE.
5. **Assess the space needs of the Department and Program and develop long-term plans to support space and location needs.** Review the current availability and space needs of service

providers and ensure a site-by-site plan to provide appropriate, confidential space for service delivery and assessment requirements. Consider developing a long-term plan for co-housing the entire Department leadership team at the same location.

Special Education Revenues and Expenditures

Special Education Funding History

Background

The current special education funding structure, commonly referred to as AB 602 (the legislation that implemented the funding formula), has been updated multiple times since 1997. A full history of special education funding is provided in a separate attachment to this report (SSC, *School Funding and Accountability in California*, 2023) , with relevant highlights incorporated into this section of the report. Under AB 602, funding is based on ADA, not the number of students being served in special education, and the funding is allocated through the SELPA rather than directly to the LEA. The SELPA Governance Council determines the method and local funding distribution for state and federal funds.

Special education funding is composed of state and federal funds. Federal special education funding is provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and is apportioned by the CDE based upon the authority provided in the state budget. Federal funds are calculated for the state based upon prior-year reported ADA (85%) and prior-year reported participation in the free and reduced-price school meals program (15%) as a proxy for increasing equity of funding. Most federal funds are allocated by the CDE directly to the SELPA to distribute to member LEAs.

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) has changed thinking about funding for educational services, as all students generate funding to be used to provide base educational programs. The hierarchy of funding for special education students should be in the following order:

1. LCFF, including funding being used to support increased and/or improved services for eligible pupils as appropriate and outlined in the LCAP
2. Lottery and other ADA-related state funding
3. In the immediate term—additional one-time federal funds for the benefit of all students intended to mitigate the impact of the pandemic
4. AB 602 funds
5. Any federal special education funds

In understanding special education funding, LEAs should remember 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 IEPs. Students in special education generate LCFF dollars and 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. This can include tutoring and counseling services, field trips and assemblies, curriculum, assessments and testing, behavior intervention, supplies, PD, etc.

It was clear from interviews there are some differences between general education and special education as it pertains to available programs, integration of special education into the general education environment, PD, and available resources for the Program. During interviews, staff noted there is no standard approach for integrating SWDs into general education classrooms. Instead, the onus is on site administration to implement an integrated model, which contributes to the lack of consistency between sites regarding inclusive practices. It is important for the District to implement a consistent policy regarding the inclusion of SWDs in the general education program and provide clear communication regarding available resources to cover equipment costs and how they can be accessed. This is critical for site leaders and site support staff, as many of the decisions about location of services use of site resources, and access to general education services are being made by site leaders with limited collaboration or consultation with the Director.

As noted previously, districts are required to spend the same amount of state and local dollars on SWDs as they do on all students before any special education dollars are spent, and services to SWDs—exclusive of IEP-required services—are not a special education expense. Therefore, base program curriculum, supplies, tests, and other materials should be made available to special education teachers in the same proportion as they are made available to general education teachers and should be provided as a General Fund expense.

Expenditures should be properly coded so those individuals, services, supplies, etc. supporting both general education and special education are not solely attributed to special education. For example, the District appears to be charging the full cost of service providers to special education when the costs could be split funded between special education and general education based on the nature of their services. The District should ensure all intervention or pre-IEP expenses are properly coded to general education, as pre-IEP interventions and expenses are general education expenses, but occasionally find their way into the special education budget. During interviews program staff indicated the procurement of materials and supplies is defined and handled by the Department and some basic supplies such as computers and curriculum are being charged to special education even though the District has included a goal in the LCAP to support special education programs. Trained clerical and Business Services staff are best positioned to review expenditures and ensure they are coded correctly with the support and input from Program staff.

Special Education Revenues

Equity in special education funding can be elusive as SELPA and each LEA will have unique needs the state cannot predict. The SELPA Local Plan and Annual Allocation Plan are the tools through which a local determination of resources, programs, and implementation is made. The District is a member of the San Mateo County SELPA. The SELPA's 2023-24 projected AB 602 apportionment is \$81,101,674 and \$18,865,784 in federal special education grants. Per the District-provided data, its 2023-24 AB 602 entitlement is \$6,774,160, and \$1,732,581 in federal grants for a total of \$8,506,741 special education revenue.

Contributions

Special education will always be a program that requires a significant contribution from the unrestricted General Fund of each LEA, with a statewide average contribution rate of 10.26% of the General Fund sources contributed to special education programs in 2021-22. The District contributed 16.47% of the unrestricted General Fund to special education which is above both the statewide average and the comparative group average of 13.43%.

The District's total General Fund revenues were the third highest of the comparative group. The District's revenue dedicated to special education was the fourth highest of the comparative group. The contribution as a percentage of total District expenses was the second highest (as shown in Figure 6 which displays a comparison of total General Fund revenue, Program revenue, and contributions among all comparative districts) at 16.47%.

Figure 6: Program Revenue per ADA (Grades TK-12), 2021-22

District	Special Education Revenue per ADA	Total General Fund Revenue per ADA	Contribution per ADA	Contribution as a Percent of Total Expense
Alameda City USD	\$1,412.87	\$17,767.24	\$2,967.01	17.37%
Morgan Hill USD	\$1,384.36	\$15,076.55	\$1,759.67	11.82%
Newark USD	\$1,311.10	\$17,156.51	\$1,761.94	11.27%
South San Francisco USD	\$1,267.05	\$17,778.94	\$3,054.16	16.47%
New Haven USD	\$1,230.85	\$15,505.43	\$1,880.43	12.58%
Milpitas USD	\$1,206.62	\$14,758.36	\$1,617.20	10.72%
Berkeley USD	\$1,155.16	\$22,134.39	\$3,139.74	14.28%
Novato USD	\$1,048.39	\$15,521.46	\$1,892.56	12.83%
Santa Cruz City Schools	\$861.49	\$18,338.46	\$2,695.16	15.28%

Source: 2021-22 Standardized Account Code Structure (SACS) state-certified data

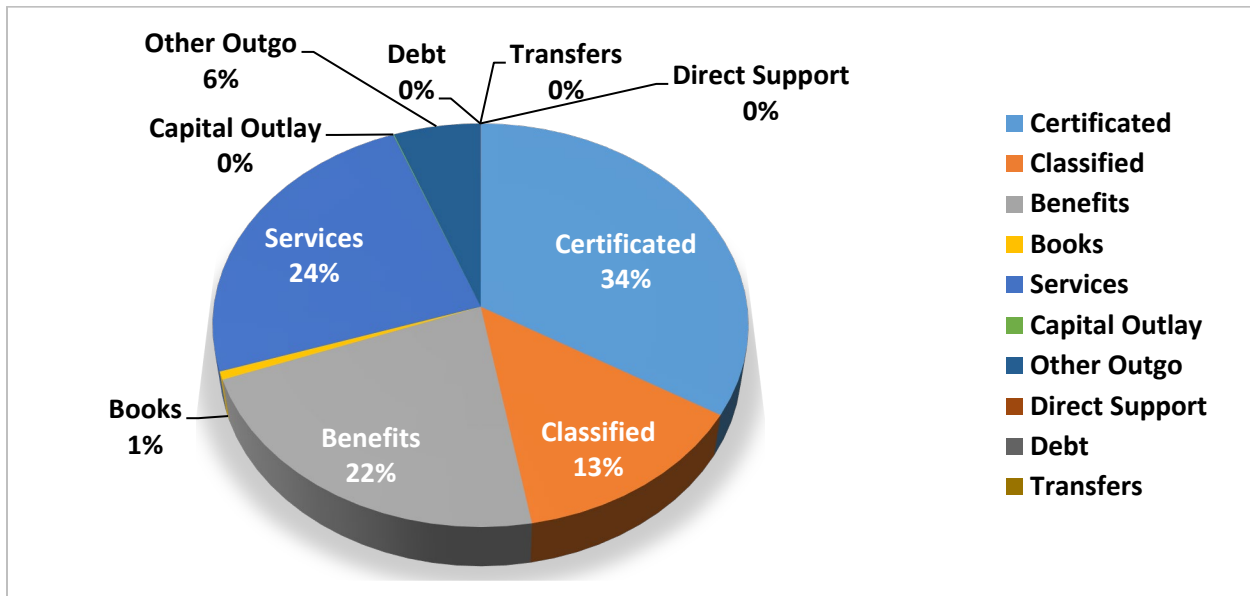
Expenditures

The following analysis includes a comparison of the District to other similarly sized unified school districts. This financial comparison data utilizes 2021-22 state-certified data accessible from publicly available state resources.

Operating Costs

Figure 7 shows the distribution of operational costs for special education programs in the District. Salaries and benefits made up 69% of total special education costs. This was lower than is typically experienced for personnel expenses. On average, unified school districts statewide spent approximately 78% of their total special education expenditures on personnel in 2021-22. A closer look at the data, however, shows that the District was spending an additional 24% in the “Services” category (the average statewide for school districts was 17%), which includes contracted services, such as transportation, nonpublic schools (NPSs), contracted services to cover for vacancies, utilities, rents and repairs, or similar services from a private vendor.

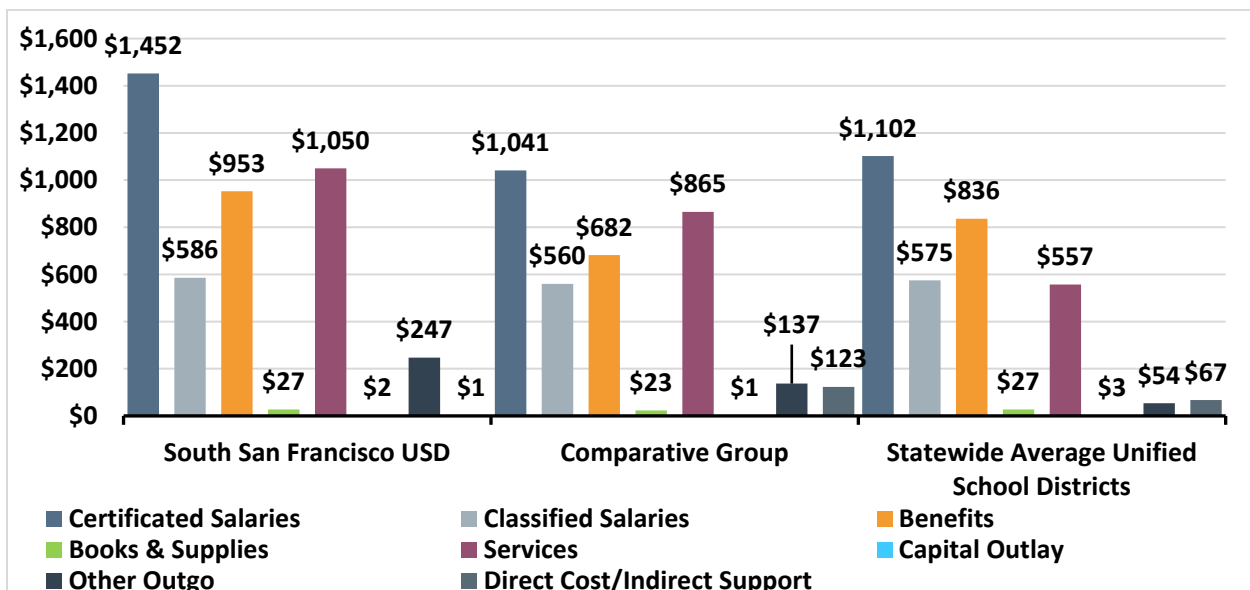
Figure 7: Special Education Expenditures, 2021-22



Source: 2021-22 Standardized Account Code Structure (SACS) state-certified data

Districts with higher total personnel expenses tend to have lower contracted services costs. As a percentage, the District spent 93.56% of total program expense on personnel and contracted services, which is more than the comparative group average of 91.69% but less than the statewide average of 95.25%. As represented in Figure 8, the District spent \$4,041 per ADA for personnel and contracted services while the comparative group average was \$3,148 per ADA and the statewide average for unified school districts was \$3,070 per ADA.

Figure 8: Special Education Expenditures /ADA by Major Object, 2021-22



Source: 2021-22 SACS state-certified data

Position control will be discussed further in the Comparable Staffing section; however, since salaries and benefits make up more than 69% of the Program expenditures and an additional 24% of expenditures are for contracted services, it is worth noting here. The business office provided an extremely detailed and thorough spreadsheet which is used as a foundation for collaborative conversations with the Director. The amount of information is substantial, and the resource is excellent. However, there is still not an exact calibration between this document and the database kept by the Department. It is critical the District have a single, functioning process to reconcile position control on a regular basis. Proper reconciliation is a shared responsibility between Program administration, Business Services staff, and HR staff. At a minimum, reconciliation should align with the budget development and interim reporting cycle.

Figure 9 shows a comparison of total expense per ADA and contributions per ADA among all comparative districts. In this group, the District represents the second highest in expense per ADA and is also the second highest in contribution per ADA. (The overall contribution is a mathematical calculation based upon revenues minus expenditures.) The District contributed 70.68% as a percent of total Program expenses, from the General Fund, as compared to an average of 64.76% for the comparative group. Over half of the comparative districts contributed more than the statewide average contribution, which was 58.05% in 2021-22.

Figure 9: Program Expense per ADA (Grades TK-12), 2021-22

LEA	Expense per ADA	Contribution per ADA	Contribution as a Percent of Special Education Expense	Contribution as % of Total Expense
Alameda City USD	\$4,379.88	\$2,967.01	67.74%	17.37%
South San Francisco USD	\$4,321.21	\$3,054.16	70.68%	16.46%
Berkeley USD	\$4,294.90	\$3,139.74	73.10%	14.28%
Santa Cruz City Schools	\$3,556.65	\$2,695.16	75.78%	15.28%
Morgan Hill USD	\$3,144.03	\$1,759.67	55.97%	11.82%
New Haven USD	\$3,111.29	\$1,880.43	60.44%	12.58%
Newark USD	\$3,073.04	\$1,761.94	57.34%	11.27%
Novato USD	\$2,940.95	\$1,892.56	64.35%	12.83%
Milpitas USD	\$2,823.82	\$1,617.20	57.27%	10.72%

Source: 2021-22 SACS state-certified data

Overall, the District was spending more educating its SWDs than the statewide average and most comparative districts. The District ranked second highest in the comparative group for total expenses, local contribution, and contribution as a percentage of special education expense.

Transportation Revenue and Expenditures

The LCFF absorbed many funding sources from state categorical programs that existed before the LCFF. Home-to-school transportation was one of these programs and the funding remains an add-

on to the LCFF. The 2022 Enacted Budget includes on-going unrestricted funding to reimburse school districts for up to 60% of the cost for home to school transportation, this includes the transportation of SWDs. School districts must maintain the same level of expenditure, or a maintenance of effort (MOE), for home-to-school (HTS) transportation as they did (up to the state funding amount) in 2012-13. The MOE requirement does not specify whether the transportation is for the general population of students or specialized transportation. For this reason, SSC staff chose to review transportation separately from other revenue and expenditures. The District should evaluate the possible impact of charging transportation to a special education goal and resources while the revenue of the HTS transportation reimbursement is received as an unrestricted resource. Some special education transportation should be charged to a special education goal, such as IDEA-mandated transportation to meet the unique, disability-related needs of a student to ensure access to special education services, such as specialized transportation due to use of a wheelchair, or students who could not otherwise be transported safely without specialized support. However, many SWDs are transported from HTS due to the location of a program, rather than due to unique special education needs. The District has the flexibility to locally determine whether some of these costs should more appropriately be charged to general education HTS transportation.

Based on summary data received from the District, of the 1,526 SWDs reported in 2023-24, 146 students were provided transportation services. This is a reasonable increase with prior-year trends, which showed the District transported 112 SWDs in 2021-22 and 135 SWDs in 2022-23. The District provided transportation to approximately 9.5% of its SWDs in 2023-24.

The District provided data on the number of SWDs determined to be eligible for transportation, which included the nature of the SWD's disability and whether or not a student attended their school of residence. Figure 10 shows approximately 246 SWDs (or 16%) were determined to be eligible for transportation—100 more students than the 146 that accepted and were provided transportation services.

Figure 10: SWDs Eligible for Transportation Services by Primary Disability and Grade Span, 2023-24

Primary Disability	Grade					Total
	Preschool	TK-3	4-6	7-8	9-12+	
Autism (AUT)	27	41	22	9	24	123
Deaf	1	0	1	0	1	3
Emotional Disturbance (ED)	0	0	3	4	14	21
Hard of Hearing (HH)	1	1	0	0	0	2
Intellectual Disability (ID)	0	2	3	5	23	33
Multiple Disabilities (MD)	0	2	0	0	1	3
Orthopedic Impairment (OI)	0	1	1	2	0	4
Other Health Impairment (OHI)	1	8	5	6	7	27
Specific Learning Disability (SLD)	0	0	4	1	10	15
Speech or Language Impairment (SLI)	9	5	0	0	1	15
Total	39	60	39	27	81	246

Source: District-provided data

Figure 11 provides 2023-24 transportation data for the 217 SWDs eligible for transportation by the District within the District and whether those SWDs were attending their home school (school of residence) or being transported to a school/program other than their home school (school of attendance). Of these 217 students, 86.6% attended a school other than their school of residence. While some percentage of these students would still require transportation if assigned to their home school, others would not.

Typically, the practice of attending a program located at a school other than the home school is established to conserve costs using centralized services. Although most often implemented as a cost-saving measure, it is noted this practice can contribute to increased transportation costs if students are being provided transportation solely because certain services and/or programs are not available at their home schools. While decentralization might not be a viable option at all school sites or for all programs given the number of students necessary to support a program, an analysis of programs and which sites might have the necessary concentration of students should be periodically undertaken.

Figure 11: Placement of SWDs Eligible for District Transportation, 2023-24

School Site	School of Attendance	Eligible to be Transported to School of Residence	Eligible to be Transported from School of Residence
Alta Loma Middle School	6	0	6
Baden High	41	2	39
Buri Buri Elementary	4	4	0
El Camino High	5	5	0
Junipero Serra Elementary	33	5	28
Los Cerritos Elementary	27	5	22
Oster Elementary	1	1	0
Parkway Heights Middle School	13	7	5
Ponderosa Elementary	13	3	10
Skyline Elementary	10	1	9
South San Francisco High	20	12	8
Spruce Elementary	19	1	18
Sunshine Gardens Elementary	5	2	3
Westborough Middle School	20	6	14
Transported Out of District	26	0	26
Total	243	54	188

Source: District-provided data

The number of SWDs identified as receiving transportation is a subset of those determined eligible for transportation. Some parents elect to provide transportation themselves. The number eligible for transportation services represents the potential cost pressure to the District for transportation services of SWDs and should be included in any analysis of potential savings that could result from reducing the number of SWDs attending their home schools.

The District is currently contracting with two different agencies to provide transportation services within and outside the District. Staff report they are currently working to improve communication and efficiency with the agencies. They have recently switched from a paper process to an online process and report that this is already making a positive impact.

The District has defined and implemented procedures for the determination of eligibility of transportation services for SWDs. Included in Appendix B is a sample transportation decision making tree to assist IEP teams when transportation is being considered as a related service. The District should review IEPs that add transportation as a related service to ensure the services are not hindering the ability of the student to gain independence appropriate to their abilities. Lastly, in Appendix C, the CDE provides Special Education Transportation Guidelines, which may be helpful when reviewing local policies, procedures, and practices.

Budget Communication, Monitoring, and Management

The budget is not purely a management or compliance document, it is also a guide for staff to use as they conduct the day-to-day operations of the District to provide a high-quality learning experience for each student. Budget communication is a best practice that has the potential to unlock creativity and drive conversations about service choices that can save money and help improve student performance. The regular review of operations addresses obstacles and roadblocks and determines if there are opportunities to leverage unique talents for students and staff's benefit. Budget monitoring should not curtail services but should directly manage expenses with current data and useful analysis that facilitates decision-making and limits deviations from the District's and/or Department's spending plans/budgets, which could result in expenditures exceeding budget. Increased collaboration and participation in management of the Department budget will help reign in growth of contributions required from the General Fund, which has become unsustainable over time. Systems that include regular monitoring will serve to stabilize the District's special education MOE.

The District schedules budget meetings between the Director and Business Services staff with the intention of improving communication and collaboration. The meetings include a review of staffing and expenditures, as well as detailed information from the fiscal side. These meetings have helped to improve the accuracy of budget projecting and monitoring process. The business office must ensure that process, procedure, and protocols are followed, especially to ensure there are no audit findings. However, the amount of information presented in the budget meetings is substantial, and the methods for accounting, tracking, and ensuring budgetary decisions are reportedly different across departments. Several interviews noted fiscal decisions related to the Program experience more scrutiny and are on a different timing schedule than others in the District. It was noted the Director and the Business Services staff may have different understandings of the required processes, and what constitutes requesting, approval, and encumbrance of positions. There is a need for written policy and procedure about how to handle the need for and use of contracted service providers to cover vacancies, maternity, or other leaves, or for supplemental coverage due to caseloads of student needs. It appears both departments are tracking and sharing information, but the consistency between the fiscal systems and the Department database is not supporting clear understanding of what is budgeted, encumbered, and which contracts are in place. Continued alignment of expectations, clarity of communication, and written documentation are all part of developing collaborative and functional systems, providing the Director and Business Services the opportunity to create protocols, practices, and procedures that incorporate needed communication and desired outcomes for the Program.

Legal Costs and Settlements

Litigation occurs when there are disputes between families and the District regarding services that meet the definition of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). When preventative measures such as alternative dispute resolution are unsuccessful, the remedy for families is to file a due process claim, then follow through with mediation and hearings if not resolved. SSC staff is aware litigation across the state and nation has increased over the last decade and is expected to continue to increase. Annual PD for IEP teams is recommended and should include general and special education teachers, specialists, and site leaders to ensure every participant is aware of the requirements of IDEA.

Staff well trained on assessment and placement of SWDs will protect against child find claims and standardized protocols providing consistency across campuses could address issues of inclusive access to the LRE and reduce the possibility of staff missing critical steps in the overall process. The SELPA provides support for alternative dispute resolution, including training for staff and administrators, facilitation of challenging meetings, and regional information on common complaints, filings, and effective responses that prevent litigation and settlements.

Federal Non-Supplanting Requirement and Maintenance of Effort

While the District is required to provide a FAPE and not disapprove services due to costs, it should implement policies, procedures, and a budget process that is cognizant of fiscal realities in alignment with the LCAP and other programmatic and fiscal plans of the District. During the budget process each year, the District must ensure it meets the federal MOE requirement for special education¹, which requires the District to spend, with some exceptions, the same level of state and local funds (or local funds only) on special education as in the prior year.

Based on information received in interviews, the District is aware of the need to manage and control increases in its MOE obligation. Business Services actively tracks the District's MOE throughout the year and uses allowable exemptions to control increases. To date, the District monitors and has met its MOE requirement, as costs have steadily risen over the past several years. The District should monitor the impact of higher-cost employees and/or students that exit the District, and any reductions in services for costly support and services to students. The SELPA can provide support in reviewing and monitoring the MOE obligation and documentation required to benefit from exemptions. The CDE monitors compliance with the federal regulation and ensures federal funds are used to supplement, not supplant, state and local funds for special education. The general rule is LEAs must spend the same level of state and local funding on special education as in the prior year, either in total or per capita.²

¹Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations Sections (CFR §) 300.203-300.205

²34 CFR 300.231-300.233

The District should be aware that while the MOE must be maintained—meaning it cannot spend less in a future year than it did in the prior previous year—this does not mean cost saving measures cannot be put in place. The implementation of policies and procedures related to expenditures and instituting appropriate District systems might not result in immediate cost savings but will help curb future increases and slow growth in the long term.

Summary of Revenue and Expenditures

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 IEPs. Students in special education generate LCFF dollars first and those dollars should contribute to their educational program—services exclusive of IEP-required services are not a special education expense.

In summary, as compared to eight similarly sized unified school districts, the District spends more on direct personnel and special education than both the comparative group average and the statewide average. The District spends more per ADA in the “Services” category, which includes contracted services such as transportation, nonpublic schools, utilities, rents and repairs, or services from private vendors. The District’s Program expenses are second highest of the eight districts. Its revenues and General Fund contribution, as a percent of total special education expenses, are the third highest, falling above the group median. 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 15.9%. Overall, the District is spending more on special education relative to its student population.

The District has met its federal supplement-not-supplant requirement and MOE. It is recommended that the District consult with the SELPA prior to closing its books to ensure that all MOE obligations and exemptions are captured and documented. In addition, MOE monitoring should continue to be used to support budget development and ensure the accounting process accurately and more inclusively projects and monitors special education expenditures.

Recommendations—Revenues and Expenditures

- 6. Develop a formalized and collaborative budget development and monitoring process, aligned to the budget process followed by other departments, programs and sites.** The Director of Business Services should meet with the Director to discuss the budget and Program needs in advance of budget preparation or submittal and a calendar including specific meeting topics should be established collaboratively for regular check-ins throughout the year. Further, a comprehensive process should be established for the tracking of contracted service providers, including protocols for reviewing position control to make sure positions are coded properly.

This process should include monitoring of the MOE obligation, eligible exemptions, and planning to manage MOE growth and expenditures.

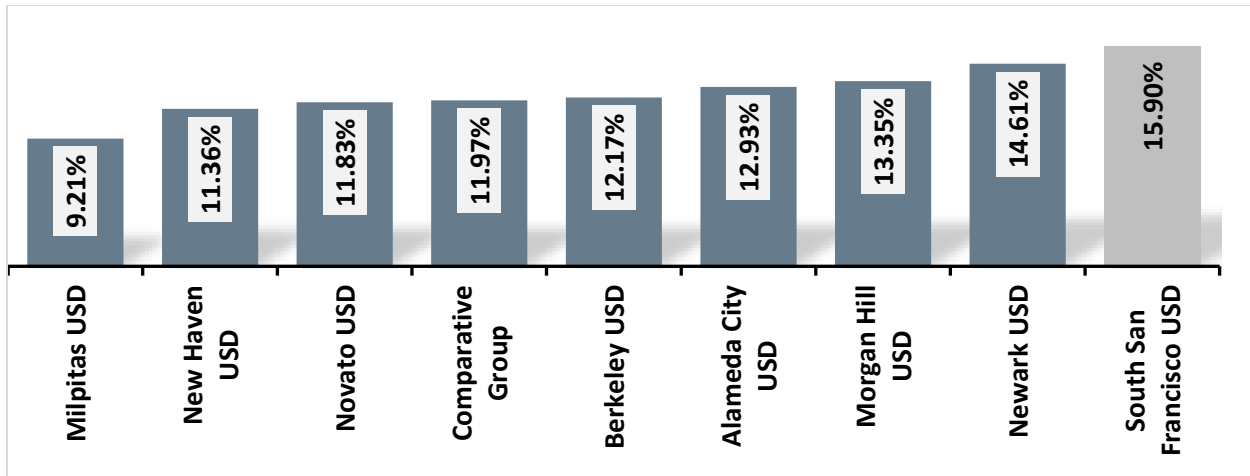
7. **Review the funding and work assigned for all staff, particularly those paid for using special education resources and goals.** Salaries and benefits make up 69% of the special education expenditure and it is important to make sure they are funded appropriately. If staff are providing services or support that is for all students, they should not be fully funded out of special education resources. Additionally, assigning a special education goal to a service that could benefit all students could provide additional flexibility in the services provided to students as well as reduce the future MOE liability for the District.
8. **Continue to implement and refine District transportation policies and procedures for SWDs.** The District has developed transportation policies and procedures which reflect practices that follow state guidelines for special education transportation. The Department staff should continue to work with transportation providers and use available technology streamline communication and service requests. The District should provide annual training to IEP team staff on the established transportation protocols and ensure they are implemented consistently and with fidelity.
9. **Develop a plan for hiring a core number of full-time instructional aides to help with staff retention, improve turnover rates, and improve support for the Program.** Converting a core number of part-time instructional aides to full-time positions may improve staff retention, morale, and services to students. The ability to recruit and retain trained staff will reduce the District's reliance on contracted agencies and provide a forum for providing direct supervision to the service providers.

Special Education Cost Drivers

Reviewing revenue and expenditure data and making comparisons to a regional group and/or to statewide data can illuminate problem areas, but financial data is only part of the story. Like most LEAs, most of the District's costs associated with operating the Program are in personnel. Staffing costs are driven by the number and types of students served by the District and by the programmatic choices made by the District. For this reason, this section examines the number of students served as a percentage of total enrollment and the percentage of students served by disability type. SSC staff also reviewed district-wide interventions and the degree to which they are reducing referrals to special education.

As Figure 12 shows, the average number of students receiving special education services as a percentage of overall enrollment among the comparative group is 11.97%. At 15.90%, the District represents the highest population of SWDs in the comparative group.

Figure 12: Percentage of SWDs (Ages 0–22) and Comparative Group Average, 2021-22



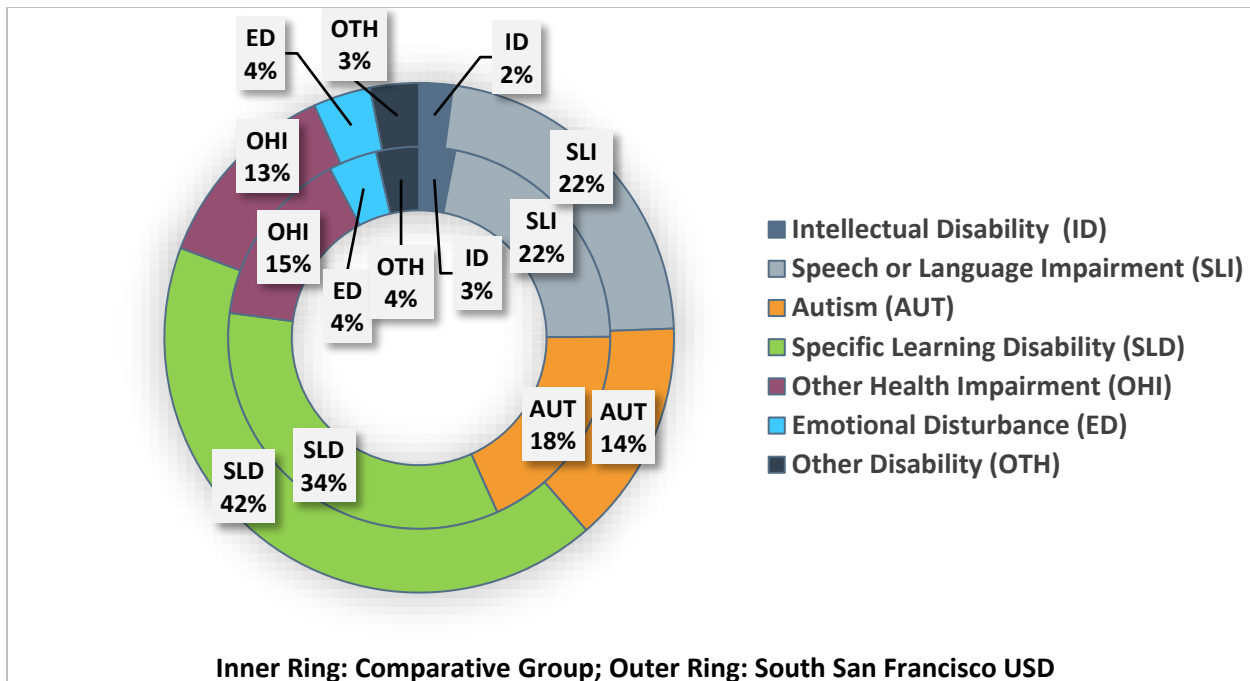
Source: 2021-22 CDE state-certified data

Incidence of Disability

While looking at the enrollment of SWDs is necessary, it is also important for program planning purposes to consider the incidences of disability by type and the programmatic services required for services unique to some disability conditions. Such an analysis can point to areas where the District may need to consider creating or phasing out programs as well as potential areas of over-identification. Additionally, it can shed light on the number of students being provided high-cost services and grade levels at which patterns arise or cohorts of students are anticipated.

Figure 13 provides a breakdown of the incidences of disability by type and compares the District to the comparative group average. There are 13 categories of special education eligibility as defined by the IDEA. Figure 13 includes the categories of ID, SLI, AUT, SLD, OHI, ED, and Other Disability. Other Disability includes the low-incidence disability categories of HH, Deaf, Deaf Blindness, MD, Traumatic Brain Injury, OI, and Visual Impairment. Incidences of disability are calculated by dividing the counts of school-age students reported as having a disability by the total number of SWDs being served. When comparing the percentage of students served by disability type between the District and the comparative group, the District has lower incidence of students in the categories of OHI, Other Disability, ID, and AUT. The District has a similar incidence of students designated as ED and SLI to the comparable group. However, there is a dramatic increase in the number of students with SLD, with the District incidence of SLD at 42% and the comparable group at 34%. Of the categories reported, AUT, ED, and ID are considered high-cost disabilities. Of these three disabilities, the District was like the comparable group except for lower rates of AUT by 4%.

Figure 13: Comparison of Percentage of Disability by Type, 2021-22



Source: State-certified data 2021-22

Pre-Referral Interventions

Having an effective process of early intervention is a proven, cost-effective way to address the academic, behavioral, and/or social-emotional needs of students. The use of research-based interventions is required by both the IDEA and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)³ prior to referral for special education, and the results of intervention should be documented prior to determining eligibility for special education. Research-based interventions are strategies, teaching methodologies, and supports that have been shown through one or more valid research studies to help a student improve academic, behavioral/emotional, or functional skills. Many research-based interventions provide an MTSS, with strong foundational teaching, and additional tiers of intervention and support. These systems offer a comprehensive method of differentiated supports that include evidence-based instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, research-based interventions matched to students' needs, and educational decision-making using student outcome data. If implemented with fidelity, an MTSS will reduce referrals to special education. Ideally, efforts to implement an early intervention support structure, or an MTSS, should be led, managed, and monitored as a general education function with special education providing support.

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

³ESSA is the federal K-12 education law of the United States and requires states to measure performance in reading, math, and science.

MTSS. While District staff believe that 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. Special education referral and eligibility rates indicate that current intervention practices are not effective in reducing referrals to special education. A strong MTSS should be well understood by all those engaged in the work, be embedded in all aspects of teaching and progress monitoring and have clearly measured outcomes and impacts. Staff interviews indicate there is no District-wide strategy to ensure all schools are implementing District-adopted and financially supported universal screening, progress monitoring, formative assessments, or research-based intervention. Procedures should be established to ensure the implementation and monitoring of MTSS at all sites using District-adopted materials and following District processes and procedures. As MTSS implementation is a function of general education, coordination of the professional development, monitoring, and systemic engagement required is typically assigned to educational services leadership, often with overlap and collaboration with curriculum and instruction and student services for the mental health components. Alignment with special education is important, but planning and implementation must involve the site leaders, District leadership, and have clear separation from special education for largest impact.

When a district does not have an effective, articulated, or standardized intervention strategy in place, referrals to special education may rise and identification of students who may not meet the eligibility criteria is more likely. Students who do not demonstrate clear eligibility for SLD or other eligibility categories may end up being identified as OHI for special education services, especially if they have medical conditions such as attention deficit disorder or mental health diagnoses. The District could provide targeted early intervention programs for students with similar educational needs to provide the support and accommodation needed without the necessity of special education services.

The District has a mental and behavioral health support program utilizing a combination of District staff and contacted agency service providers, as part of the MTSS, which reflects the concepts of coordination of care across systems and a focus on the needs of the whole child. Staff interviewed noted that general education teachers reach out to the behavior and mental health team and students can be referred for support. However, interviews revealed that despite resources, many staff members express a lack of confidence with handling mental and behavioral issues. Staff noted the available resources seem insufficient to meet the needs of all students including SWDs. In SSC staff's experience throughout the state, there has been a marked increase in the number of students struggling socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. Additional communication and alignment of the resources available is needed to ensure that general education and special education staff are aware of and can ensure receipt of appropriate services for all students including SWDs. The theme across interviews was the lack of consistent pre-referral interventions, or a robust MTSS process to support students in crisis, leads to special education referrals as the only option. It is apparent continued training is needed for general education and special education staff to learn about

effective MTSS strategies and to implement and track them successfully in their circle of influence—the classroom.

When students are struggling or when parents request additional assessment, the first step at the District is the SST process. Though there are written policies for referring students for an SST or for 504s, and there are written policies for an SST process once a student has been referred, the implementation of those policies varies by school. The staff interviewed noted their lack of clarity about where to find procedures or guidelines for what makes a student eligible for a 504, which results in inconsistency across sites. This is despite a clear set of Section 504 resources on the Department website available to all staff. Although not a function of special education, SST and 504 practices have a direct impact on the number of SWDs served. The District has continued work to improve the SST process, but staff report there is no process for tracking metrics (e.g., pre-referral intervention strategies, number of students identified who are being provided interventions or qualifying for special education, etc.). This lack of data makes it difficult for the District to understand the precursors to special education and to determine if any of the District-selected interventions are effective in reducing special education referrals. The District should ensure MTSS academic, social/emotional, and behavioral interventions⁴ are being monitored. Progress monitoring is a key component of an MTSS and can assist in evaluating the extent to which the MTSS is being implemented consistently across the District with fidelity.

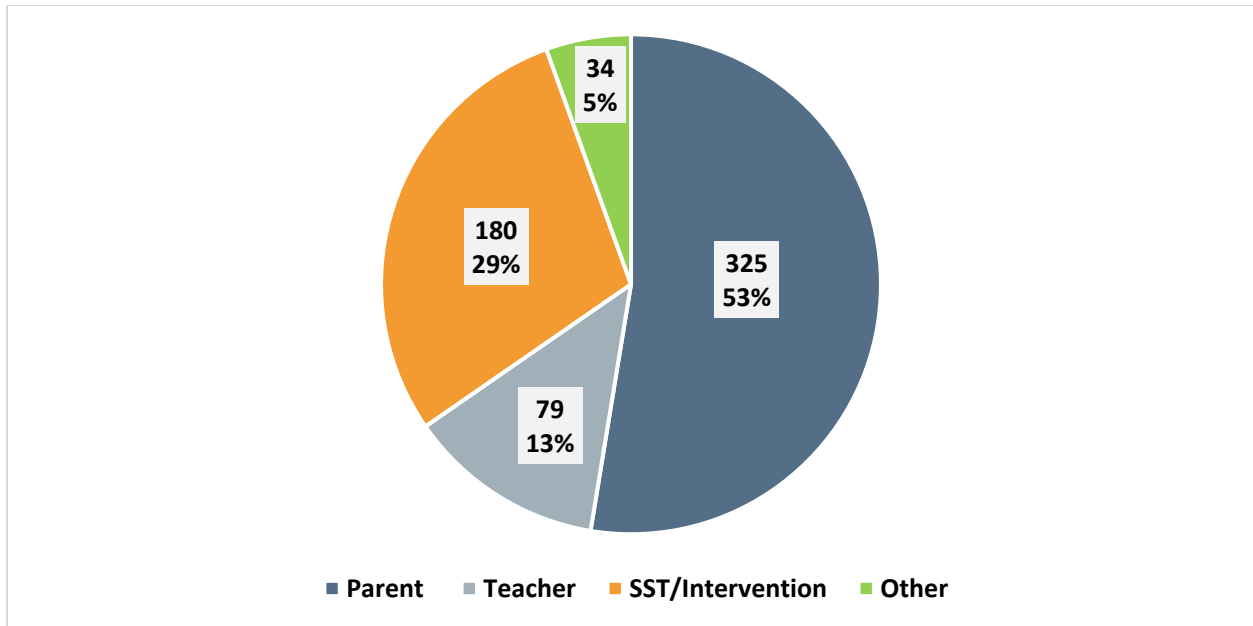
Special Education Referrals

Data on the total number of referrals by type (i.e., parent, teacher, SST, and other), if analyzed and reviewed annually, establishes trends upon which a district can make decisions related to pre-referral interventions as well as decisions related to which programs and services to provide. For example, if the data shows significant increases or decreases in the percentage of students with a particular type of disability or a specific reason for referral, a district could effectively plan for program expansion or contraction. Additionally, this data, in conjunction with data on the percentage of SWDs being served district-wide, can shed light on how a district is trending compared to the state and region.

The District is tracking information, as shown in Figure 14, on the total number of referrals to special education by a teacher, parent, SST, or other initial identification for school years 2020-21 through 2022-23. Based on the data provided, for the three-year period, with significantly more referrals being parent referrals at 53% with SST/intervention referrals second at 29%.

Figure 14: Referrals by Type from 2020-21 Through 2022-23

⁴Tier 1 interventions are those available to support the social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of all students. Tier 2 interventions are those targeted supports to groups of students in need of support. Tier 3 interventions are individualized and student-specific.

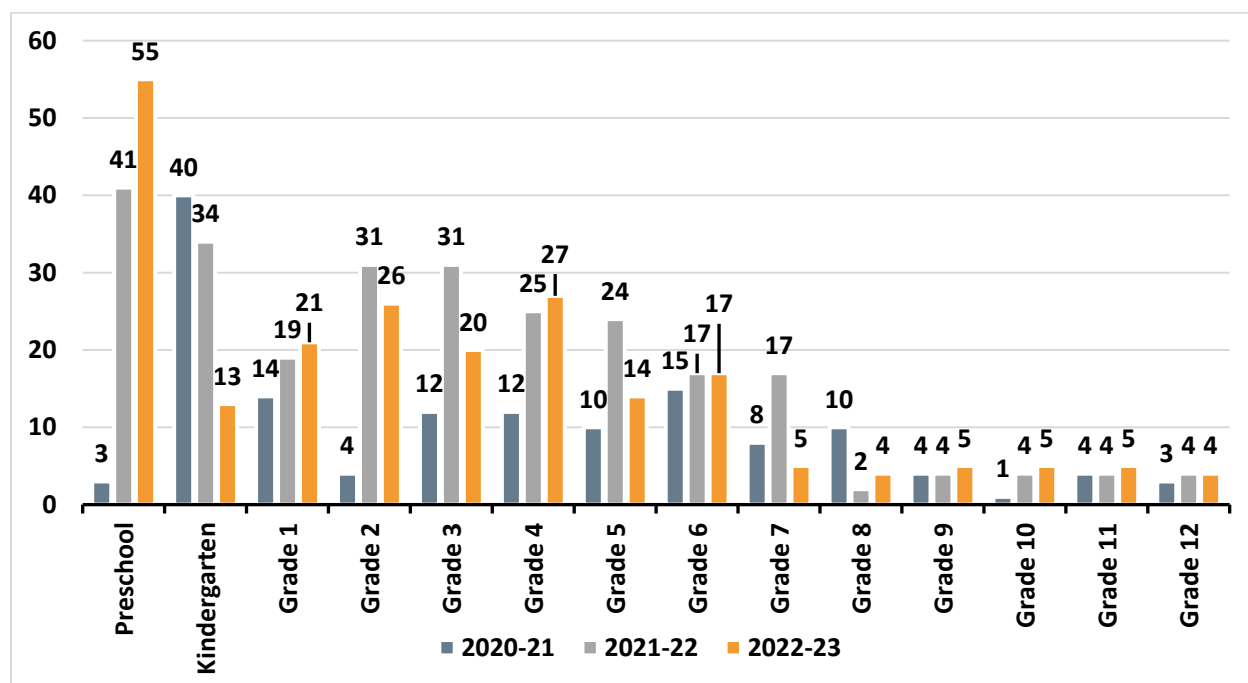


Source: District-provided data

Referral data indicates parents frequently ask for assessment prior to participation in SST interventions indicating that site level interventions are perceived as insufficient to provide support to struggling learners. Parent advocacy on behalf of their students is to be encouraged and parent engagement activities ensures the District can meet its legal obligation to ensure the parent meaningfully participates in the development of the IEP. However, a parent request for assessment does not supersede the IDEA requirements to use research-based interventions prior to referral for special education, and the results of intervention should be documented prior to determining eligibility for special education.

Between 2020-21 and 2022-23, the data shows that the District’s referrals increased significantly in 2021-22 then decreased in 2022-23. Figure 15 represents the number of referrals by grade level for the past three years. A clear pattern of increasing referrals for elementary grades was noted in 2021-22, and referrals at the Pre-K level continued to increase into 2022-23.

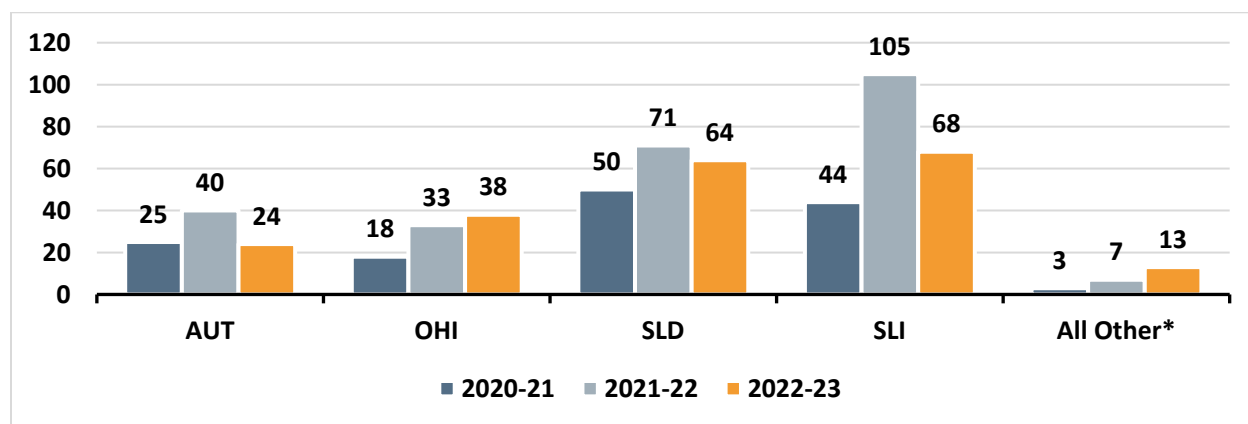
Figure 15: Referrals by Grade Level and Year, 2020-21 to 2022-23



Source: District-provided data

Figure 16 represents the number of students referred by primary disability for the past three years, showing that the largest number of referrals for the past two years has been for speech and language impairments and for specific learning disability.

Figure 16: Referral by Disability



*All Other includes: Deaf, ED, Established Medical Disability, HH, ID, and MD

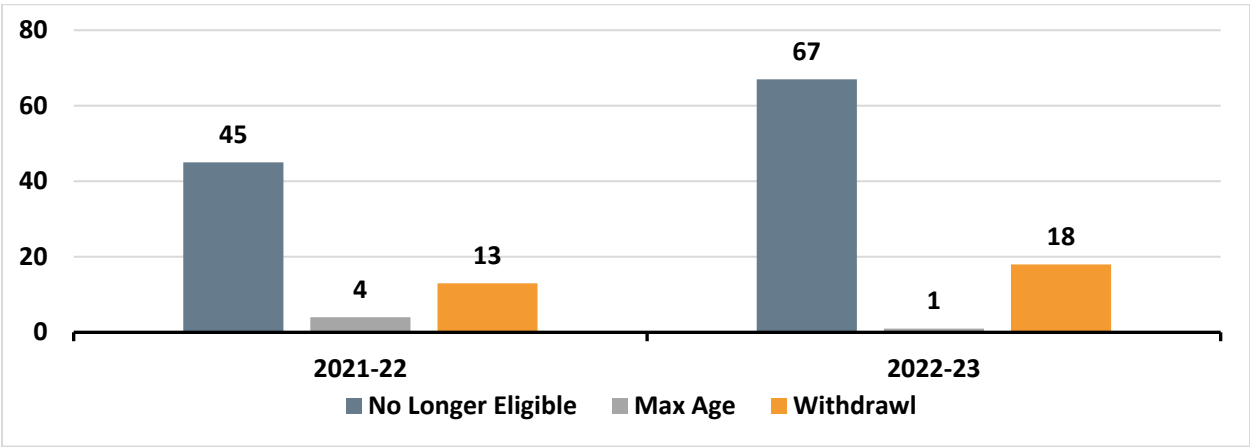
Source: District-provided data

In addition to annually tracking referrals by type, grade, and disability, the Program should continue to monitor the number of students found eligible or ineligible for special education services. Tracking the number of students referred who are not found to be eligible for special education, and the extent to which students who are referred were provided with differentiated

supports and/or evidence-based instruction prior to being referred, is important in determining the effectiveness of pre-referral interventions and whether pre-referral interventions and/or the SST process are effectively reducing referrals to special education.

The District is tracking students as they exit special education. This practice provides an important metric as it demonstrates the Program’s ability to support students and build their capacity to return to general education classrooms with their typically developing peers. For 2021-22, the District exited a total of 62 students and 86 students were exited during the 2022-23 school year. Figure 17 demonstrates the reason for students exiting in each of these years.

Figure 17: Students Exited, 2021-22 to 2022-23



Source: District-provided data

Another referral practice impacting the District is the number of SWDs who are referred for support and intervention in specialized special education programs or to an NPS. Currently, there are 26 students placed in NPS settings; the District has been successfully working to reduce the number of students served in out-of-district placements including NPS.

Disproportionality

Disproportionality is monitored under IDEA in three principal areas—overidentification, discipline, and LRE. Disproportionality occurs when students of a specific group are impacted at a statistical rate that exceeds their proportionate share of the total population. This type of analysis is powerful when incorporated into professional development and programmatic planning annually. There are several recommendations in the recent District review, including ensuring that assessment practices are reviewed, and that pre-referral processes and procedures are followed for all students referred for special education.

Disproportionality is unfortunately common in special education and there are substantial resources available from the Statewide System of Support targeted to the most common findings. The three areas of inappropriate overidentification are subject to federal calculations performed by

the CDE and incorporated into annual Compliance and Improvement Monitoring activities assigned to districts. The District has previously been identified as Significantly Disproportionate for African American (AA) students and successfully completed a multi-year sequence of activities to disrupt these challenges via a Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) plan. Embedded in the plan were activities to ensure appropriate review of AA eligibility, placement in the LRE, and for disciplinary action. While no longer subject to the specific actions of a CCEIS plan, for which the District should be celebrated, there are some practices and data points the District should continue to monitor, including the number of NPS placements and the number of AA students identified in the categories of OHI or SLD.

Continuum of Placement Options

IDEA contains two key legal concepts based upon the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment: FAPE and LRE. FAPE ensures that LEAs provide a free appropriate education based on the child's individual needs and that it is provided in a public school. LRE ensures the least restrictive placement is always sought. The first option to be considered is meant to be placement in the neighborhood school in a general education classroom with typically developing peers.

The District is using a mixed service delivery model, with a stated desire to focus on inclusive practice, but implementation results in many SWDs receiving specialized academic instruction (SAI) in pull-out settings, which are the learning settings for a portion or all SWD's educational day and are not inclusive environments. The use of learning centers to provide SAI can be a powerful component of inclusive practice, especially when the learning center is not limited to only SWDs, when SAI can also be delivered in additional settings when appropriate, and when students assigned to the learning center are assigned based on their unique needs and learning objectives. The learning centers at the elementary and middle school programs are reserved for SWDs only and there is limited SAI support provided in the general education environment. The high school educational specialists are providing a broader and more robust co-teaching option.

It is important to acknowledge some SWDs are best served in separate settings for some or most of their school day. The District's offer of FAPE in the LRE is still met under IDEA when a placement in a more restrictive setting is determined by the IEP team to be appropriate and necessary for the educational benefit of the student. However, if the needs of SWDs can be met, and their specialized services can be successfully delivered in the general education setting, then placement in that setting would constitute LRE for that student. It is important to recognize not all general education settings are the same and the quality of the programming, skill of the educators, and the availability of technology and accommodations can ensure the highest possibility for success for students in the LRE. The District has many resources, technology tools, and support being leveraged to ensure SWDs have inclusive opportunities. However, alignment across sites is recommended. Currently, students can receive completely different models of SAI delivery depending on their site of attendance, which is influenced by site leadership decision-making,

staffing resources, and physical space. As a broader continuum of inclusive service delivery is considered, alignment with Department and District goals, consideration of facilities planning, and assignment of Program staff will need to be coordinated across business, HR, and the Department.

Truly effective inclusive placement options require intensive and coordinated amounts of training, which in turn require the commitment of additional resources, including personnel and revenue, which may not be immediately available at the current time. Interviews revealed the District has been making substantial commitments to supporting the needs of new and inexperienced special educators via PD offerings and additional staff, including TOSAs to provide PD and coaching support across the continuum of special education and general education. Additionally, Program Specialists and coordinators are active in providing capacity building and support services, resources, and information to staff.

Although the District employs many instructional aides, the skills and capacity of the staff to meet the intensive levels of physical and academic support in the programs should be monitored. Behavioral challenges, and the need for additional social-emotional support, indicate additional capacity for staff to provide behavioral support is needed. When staff feel underprepared or unsuccessful in supporting student needs, a common result is a request for more adult support, when additional training and confidence building may be a better solution. The Director may need to evaluate, based on IEP offers of FAPE, whether there is a need for additional social, emotional, and behavioral support for SWDs.

The Program staff should be commended for their expressed commitment to inclusive education and to meeting the needs of the students they serve, but notwithstanding specific programs or classrooms, most instruction is provided in more restrictive environments. A commitment to expand inclusive options should be articulated in a clear and written policy/vision for the delivery of special education programs and services and should consider the spectrum of possible SWDs across the District. To do so requires the implementation of inclusive options which have staffing, PD, and fiscal implications, as well as access considerations for the SWDs whose LRE demands more individualized consideration than merely what is available at the school site or is being delivered by the educational specialists on campus.

Summary of Special Education Cost Drivers

In assessing special education cost drivers, SSC staff examined the number of students being served by disability type and the extent to which pre-referral interventions were successfully reducing referrals to special education.

There is a stated desire to have a culture of inclusion in the District— this is more evident at some sites than at others. The effective consistent implementation of MTSS will provide opportunities for students to receive interventions within the general education setting and reduce the number of students found eligible special education services. Another area the District should consider focusing on is PD opportunities for general education teachers and instructional aides to ensure appropriate pre-referral interventions are implemented with fidelity and systemic tracking is implemented to determine the efficacy of the approaches utilized.

Recommendations—Special Education Cost Drivers

10. **Implement an MTSS with fidelity.** Although not a function of special education, these practices have a direct impact on the number of SWDs served. The District should implement and monitor their MTSS and ensure it is consistently defined, planned, and included in budget planning, professional development, and outcome monitoring. The District should evaluate the effectiveness of the MTSS in the general education setting and ensure it is consistently implemented with fidelity by all educators in all classrooms and that it includes academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and attendance components. At the time of SSC’s visit, the District had a vacant MTSS position assigned to the HR Department. The District should consider if this assignment is aligned with the work of this position. The following recommendations are all interconnected to the implementation of MTSS.
11. **Consider building capacity and extending the hours of staff to provide instructional and behavioral support.** The Special Education Expenditures and Revenues section included a similar recommendation based on fiscal consideration. This recommendation builds on that recommendation by incorporating the instructional and behavioral implications. Based on the increased number of social, emotional, and behavioral incidents being experienced, the District should consider hiring employees that could be trained and then used flexibly to meet the needs of the SWDs in both instructional and behavioral areas. Building the capacity of District employees to provide instructional, behavioral, and classroom support could reduce the overall cost for individualized instructional assistance, while providing additional support to students on a school-wide basis allowing students to be supported throughout the schools and the school day. A cohort of full-time instructional aides could provide support and training for less experienced instructional aides, which could enhance morale and retention. Employees who are well trained become part of the capacity of the school and system are available to provide support to any student of the District and can be directed by the District to meet the needs of

students rather than relying on a contracted agency for services. Further, the District should consider whether the students would be better served by funding these services using unrestricted funds instead of more restrictive special education funds.

12. Train staff to consistently implement an SST process and monitor the results of Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions. While the District tracks student referrals by type (i.e., teacher, parent, SST, or other initial identification), it is not tracking the extent to which students referred were provided with differentiated supports and/or evidence-based instruction prior to referral. This data is important in determining the effectiveness of pre-referral interventions and/or the SST process in reducing referrals. SSC staff recommends the District ensure Tier 1 and Tier 2 academic, social/emotional, and behavioral interventions are being monitored for fidelity of implementation. SSC staff recommends the District review and implement the SST processes and continue to track the number of SSTs. These processes and procedures will hold staff (at the schools and within the Program) accountable to adhere to consistent procedures. Data to track would include, but should not be limited to, the following:

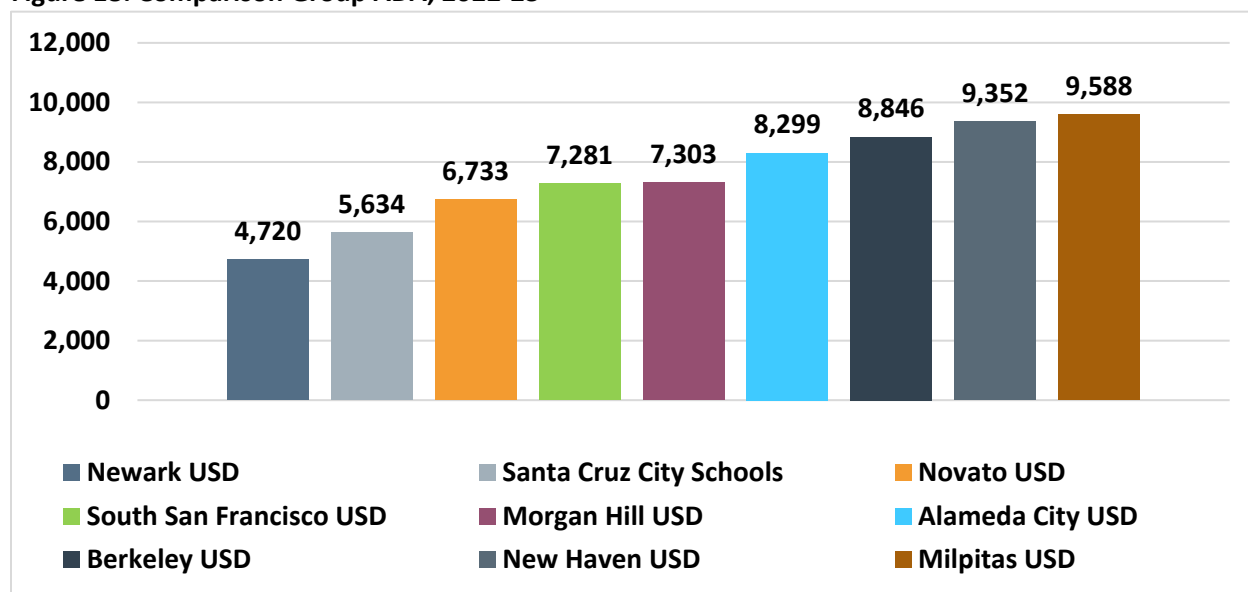
- Number of students referred to SST who receive Tier and/or Tier 2 interventions, and the type of intervention provided
- Number of students referred for an SST who are later referred for a special education assessment
- Percentage of students with an SST who are referred for assessment and found eligible or ineligible

Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing

In this section, SSC staff provides a comparative analysis of pupil personnel and related services, Department, and Program staffing levels. SSC staff compiled staff survey data collected across the state to provide the District with a comprehensive comparative analysis.

As noted earlier in this report, the District serves the second most SWDs ages 0-22 at 16.76% as a percentage of overall enrollment compared to the group average at 13.35% and has the second highest enrollment of the comparative group. Enrollment and the percentage of SWDs served directly influences the need for qualified and quality staff to support the Program. Service delivery models, types of service and intensity of need of students, and the Education Code can all influence the number of personnel required to effectively provide a compliant special education continuum of support. Additionally, analysis of caseload versus workload is important for many job classifications, as service minutes and level of student support need can dramatically change the expectations and functions of the direct service provided. To ensure clarity of comparison group ADA size, Figure 18 shows the ADA for each of the USDs considered for this study.

Figure 18: Comparison Group ADA, 2022-23



Source: 2022-23 CDE state-certified data

Pupil Personnel and Related Services Staff

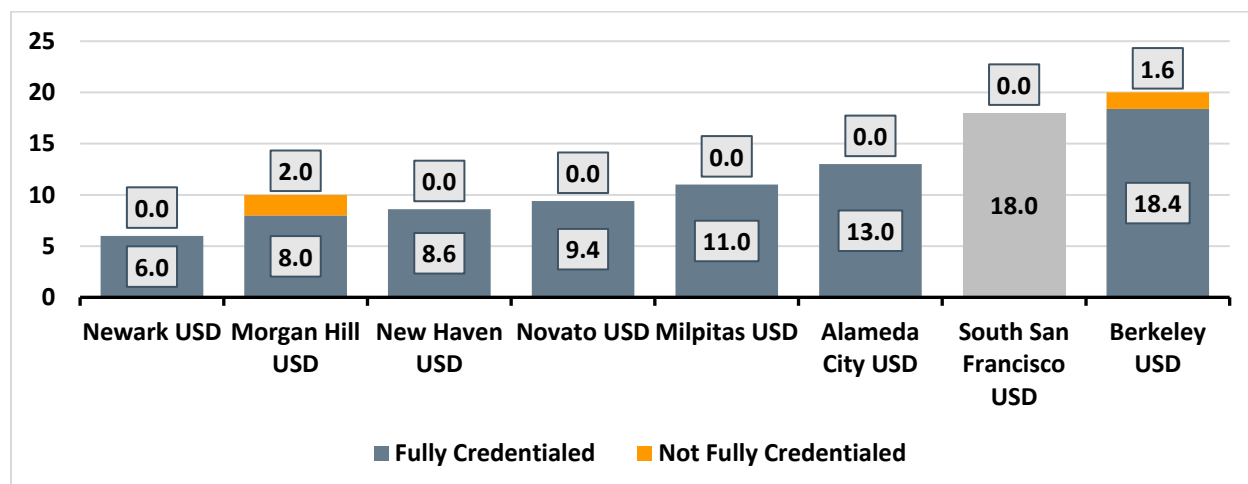
Pupil personnel and related service staffing comparisons completed for this study include school psychologists, speech language pathologists (SLPs), and behavior specialists. The data provided is based on the FTE reported to the CDE on the PDR for 2022-23. The data should include contracted service providers, but SSC staff have determined many LEAs do not accurately capture contractors on the PDR, with some indicating contracted providers and some reporting as if they are employees. The comparison numbers are still relevant for these comparisons, but acknowledgement of the potential data inconsistencies is important.

School Psychologist

School psychologists are integral parts of school district staffing, as they can provide assessment and support for SWDs, while supporting district initiatives in MTSS, progress monitoring, and delivery of SEL programming. As noted in the review of previous studies completed earlier in this report, the District has followed through with prior recommendations to greatly increase the staffing of school psychologists. The District currently lists 18 school psychologists for the 2023-24 school year, and 2.5 contracted staff providing coverage for maternity leaves, all of whom are deeply embedded in the functioning of their school site or assigned programs. Figure 19 shows the District's reported FTE for school psychologists was the second highest number of psychologists in the comparative group in 2022-23. The relative ratio of psychologists to SWDs in the District is within the range of recommended industry standard, and the importance and integration of psychologists into the general and special education programs and services makes the Department choice to have a higher number of psychologists appropriate for local need. The District is

fortunate to have primarily psychologists who are employees, as they can fully integrate their support and services across the continuum of support needed to participation in pre-referral activities, assessments, and support for students and classrooms on their caseload.

Figure 19: School Psychologist Staffing, 2022-23



Source: PDR 2022-23

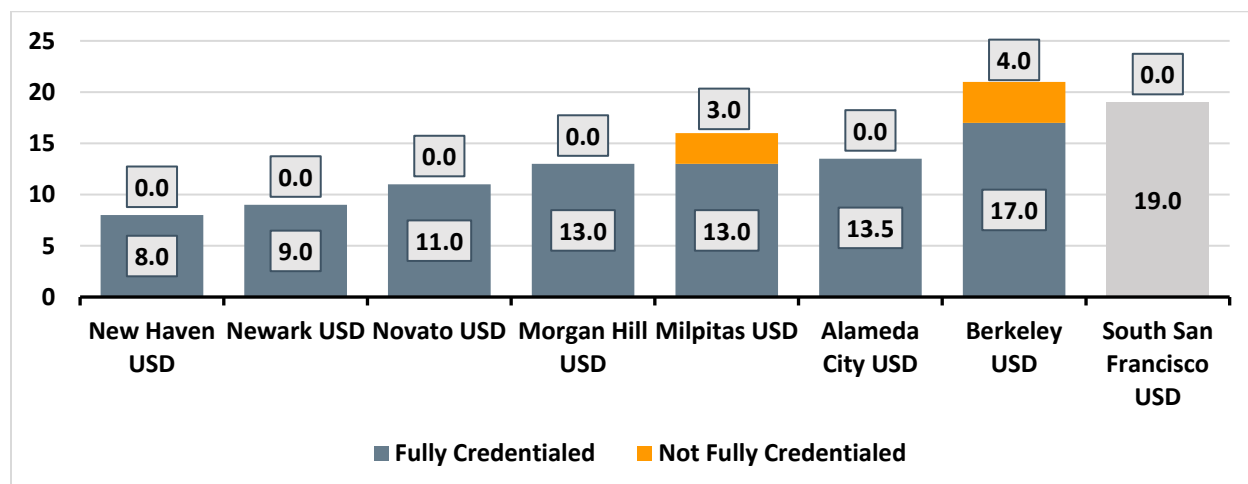
Speech Language Pathologist

All comparative districts reported employing and/or contracting with an SLP classification. Figure 20 compares the District's staffing for SLPs to those of the comparative group. The District currently employs 22 SLPs and reported 19 SLPs on the 2022-23 PDR. The need for SLPs is driven entirely by caseload and workload demands, with Education Code limits on the number of students an SLP can serve. Annual analysis of appropriate caseload support, in addition to consideration of the workload demands of each SLP is imperative to ensure staffing is continually right sized to the needs of the Program.

SLPs can provide additional programmatic support, such as support for assistive technology, augmentative communication, and for assessments, and should carefully monitor the eligibility status of every student on the caseload. Students should routinely be assessed to determine continued eligibility for special education service and for the appropriate support method for the grade level. Intensive support services are often appropriate for students in elementary levels and for those served in extensive support programs. The Director reports that exit from speech service is discussed annually, to ensure that exit is considered when grade level transitions occur to middle and high school, as missing time from class instruction at these grade levels can have more negative impact, compared to the benefit of pull-out speech service. Appropriate exit practices can free up time for the SLPs to provide additional support to the Program and system. Maximizing the assigned activities to the SLPs can ensure the largest benefit at each site is achieved. Finally, SLPs should support systemic pre-referral interventions, including consultation with general

education teachers, observation to consider environmental recommendations to improve language use and development, and to provide demonstration of strategies and techniques for all students.

Figure 20: SLP staffing, 2022-23



Source: PDR 2022-23

Unlike school psychologists, SLPs have a statutory caseload maximum identified in the Education Code based on the number of students with services. Analysis of the caseloads of the SLPs on Census Day 2023-24 indicated many were approaching caseload limits when considering the impact of ongoing assessments for eligibility. There are a few caseloads lower than the Department average, but these SLPs appear to be assigned to extensive needs programs and/or the Preschool, which both require a lower caseload or workload.

Caseload/Workload Analysis

The Director engages in regular caseload/workload monitoring wherein the goal is to ensure assignments are equitably distributed. To properly execute this plan, the Director should continue to collaborate with staff and related service professionals (SLP, psychologist, and BCBA) to engage in workload analysis by collecting data on workload demands and identifying work-related activities. The Director indicates an annual survey of these critical position's workload is completed, along with collaborative conversations about assignments and balancing workload and student need. The data collected should be organized into categories to show the distinct roles, responsibilities, and time commitments for each role type and at each site. For example, consider the time it takes for itinerant staff to travel to and from each school site to serve the students on their caseload, and consider the impact of site-level systems, such as the SST and administrative demand on staff time. As this trend data is documented over time, the Director will have a better understanding and greater flexibility when determining caseload/workload, which may impact staffing ratios, staff assignments, and support monitoring the need for additional staff.

Behavior Specialist

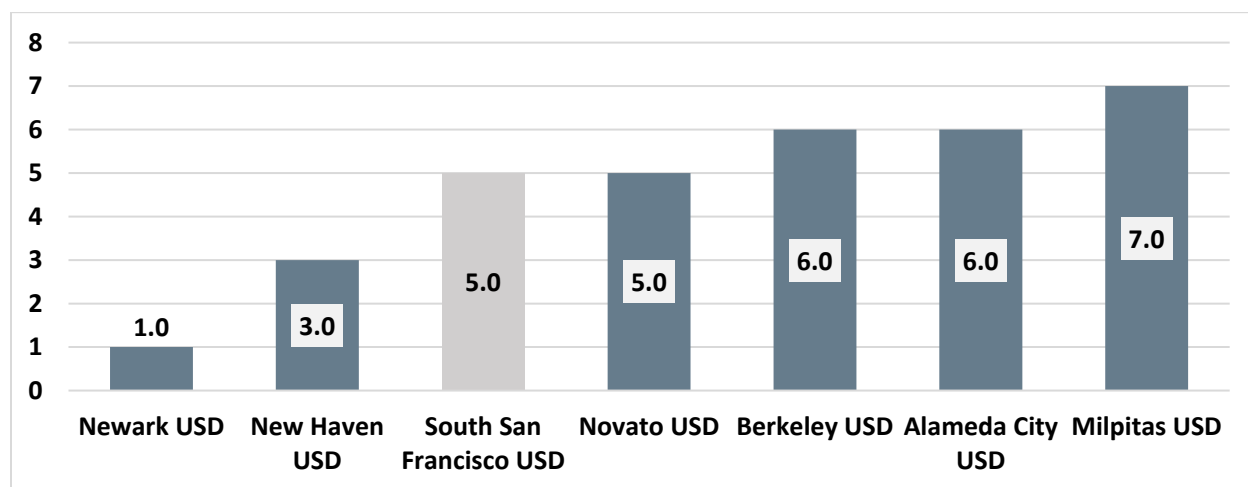
The District has invested in ensuring behavior specialist support and coverage for the Program, while simultaneously attempting to provide support for pre-referral, MTSS, and early intervention activities for the general education environment. The behavior specialists are tasked with assessments, providing direction on implementation of plans, and monitoring of students and staff. Currently, eight behavior specialists provide a broad continuum of professional development, capacity building, and consultation to ensure as many Program staff as possible are working towards student positive behavior and independence. The District also employs an additional 12 behavior support staff via contract, which may represent a situation where position control vacancies and contracted service providers do not match up in Business, HR, and Department tracking documents. Behavior specialist FTE is not a data point reported via the PDR, so comparison data is unavailable. However, given the consistency of behavioral needs reported via interviews, and the number of students and classes the behaviorists and behavior support staff are serving in both general and special education, the level of behavioral support may be insufficient to cover the demands of the system. There is a current behaviorist vacancy, which would relieve pressure from the behaviorist cohort when filled, and previously recommended behavioral capacity building could also serve to improve the skills of existing staff and remove the demand for contracted behavioral support providers.

Department Staffing Levels

Department staffing includes administrative assistants/clerical, administrators, and technical staff. These are the support staff and administrators that allow Department programs to run effectively, efficiently, and with appropriate guidance and supervision. Currently the Department is led by a Director of Pupil Personnel and Special Education Services, with a support team of five that includes a Coordinator for Mental Health, Behavior, and Assessment, and three Program Specialists. There is a vacancy in the position of Assistant Director, which would make a total of six positions if filled. As noted in previous sections of this report, the communication, collaboration, and availability of Department staff is critical to ensure smooth functioning, consistency of Program, and to support the needs of Program staff. Program specialists have various assignments across districts, with some providing support for teaching, learning and case management, others providing compliance and support for the legalities of special education programs, and some providing both of these functions under the same job classification. The Department's program specialists function in both realms, providing support for IEPs, teaching, and case management, while at the same time engaging with families and staff to support challenging cases, providing alternative dispute resolution strategies, and ensuring ongoing compliance with legal requirements and agreements. Figure 21 compares the Department staffing reported by seven of the comparative group districts, demonstrating the Department is operating at a staffing level lower than the comparative group. At five administrative support staff reported for the Department, the supervisory and administrative support team is stretched thin by the needs

of the Program. The unfilled vacancy at the Assistant Director position may represent an opportunity to make alternative choices about what the needs of the Program are compared with existing job descriptions. Additional Program Specialist support may be more valuable to the system than an Assistant Director position that may not provide on-site, curricular, and pedagogical support needed by the Program staff. Morgan Hill USD did not report supervisor/administrator positions on the PDR for 2022-23, which may represent a local decision to code leadership positions out of the General Fund rather than charged to special education, or a data entry error.

Figure 21: Department Supervisor/Administrators, 2022-23



Source: 2022-23 PDR

Program Staffing Levels

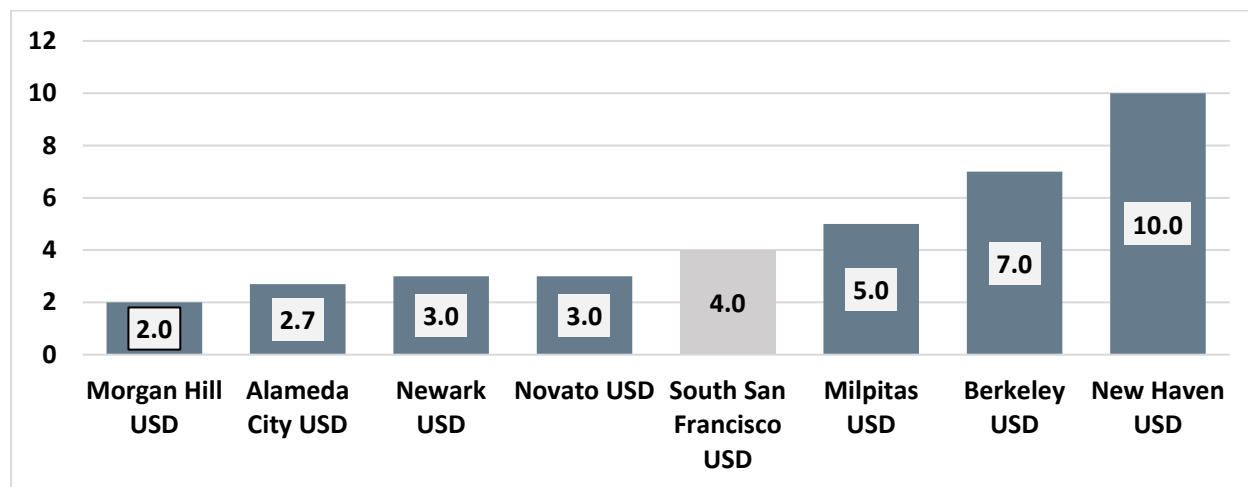
Teaching and support staff are examined in this section. The information is based on caseload and staffing reports provided by the District, as well as PDR information from the CDE. The Education Code sets forth a caseload maximum of 28 students per resource specialist program teacher, but there is no legal maximum for other educational service providers, whether they are Educational Specialists or Special Education Teachers. Analysis of teaching staff was separated by grade levels, with Pre-K and school age staff reported separately. The PDR was used to compare FTE for the groups, and current staffing was considered.

Pre-K Staff

While there are no Education Code caseload limitations for student-to-teacher ratios for PreK services, industry standard is for programs to provide increased supervision and support. Given TK requires supervision ratios of 10:1, provision of Pre-K services to SWDs should consider similar support levels. There are currently 175 students in the Program as Pre-K age, many of which receive speech only services on their IEPs. For Pre-K students served in classroom settings, there are five educators providing services and assessments across four schools, as shown in Figure

22. The PDR calculates total FTE, and there is one additional staff member for 2023-24, which can be directly tied to the increase in student referrals, assessments, and placement offers for direct service in a Pre-K setting. The District would be wise to continually consider the alignment of all early childhood initiatives that are supported by the state, as integrating resources, blending service delivery offerings, and ensuring quality services in a mixed-delivery system can reduce the impact on special education to provide the only access for parents to early intervention, prevention, or supplemental services. Leveraging and ensuring special education is a part of the continuum of universal preschool and transition into kindergarten can ensure quality outcomes for students and strong relationships with families.

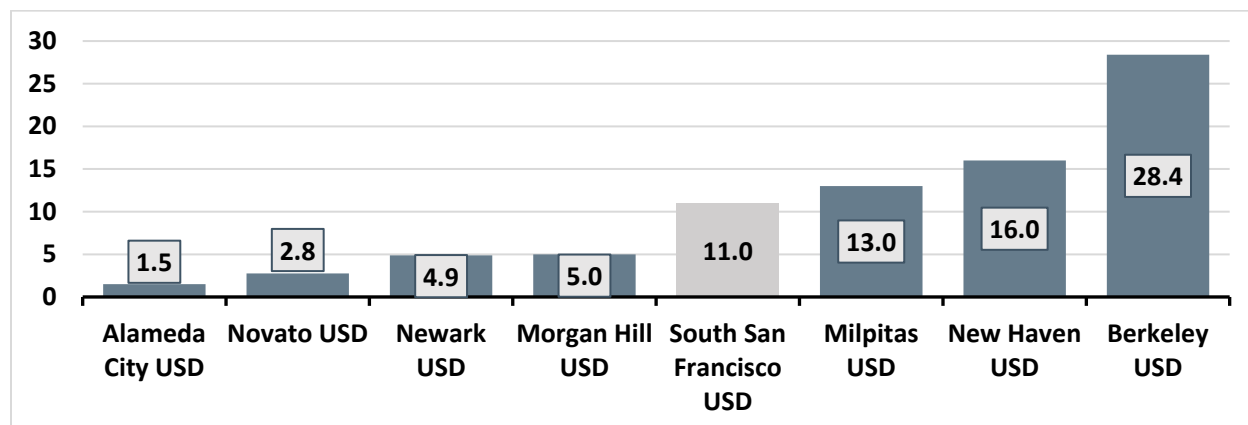
Figure 22: Pre-K Teacher Staff, 2022-23



Source: 2022-23 PDR

All Pre-K special education programs require instructional assistance for the students, and a typical student to staffing ratio is four students to one adult. As shown in Figure 23, the PDR shows the District reported 11 Pre-K instructional assistance staff last year, which is leaner than four of the districts in the comparative group. Current staffing data reflects nine paraprofessionals assigned to Pre-K classrooms and three vacant positions.

Figure 23: Pre-K Instructional Assistance Staff, 2022-23



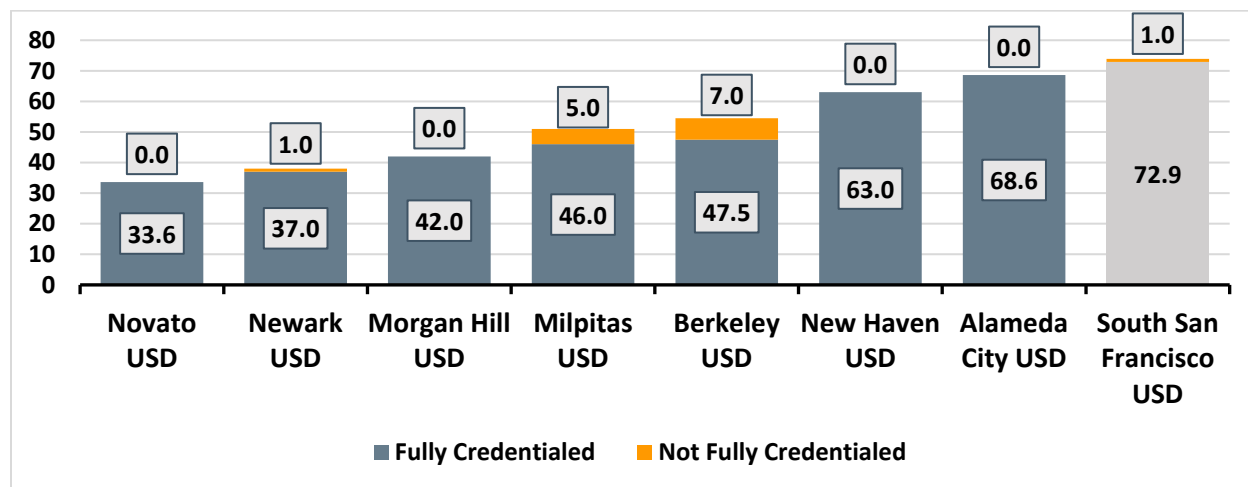
Source: 2022-23 PDR

The majority of the classified support staff are 0.8 FTE, which should provide coverage for the school day. Many districts are considering expanding classified support positions to 1.0 FTE to ensure that capacity building, PD, and appropriate planning for service delivery are built into the paid workday. These efforts can improve the quality of the workforce, impact of services delivered, and outcomes for students, and may be an avenue for the Department to consider when working to recruit and retain qualified staff for these challenging positions to fill.

School-Age Staff

The PDR does not differentiate between staff serving as a Resource Specialist teacher, which may be push-in and pull-out services, or as an Educational Specialist, nor is there a method to differentiate the intensity of student needs in the assigned classroom. When considering data from 2022-23, the District reported 73.9 FTE staff providing educational support to students ages 0-22. As shown in Figure 24, the comparable districts reported fewer school-age teaching staff, which aligns with the lower percentage of disability and SWDs in the comparable districts. For 2023-24, the District has 17 educators who are listed as Resource Specialists, with caseload averages of 23 as of December 2023, but multiple pending assessments which will increase workload. It is important to note that the PDR does not provide clarity about which educators comparable districts captured on the mandatory reporting to the CDE, so the comparison numbers may reflect differences in reporting certain types of educators on the PDR.

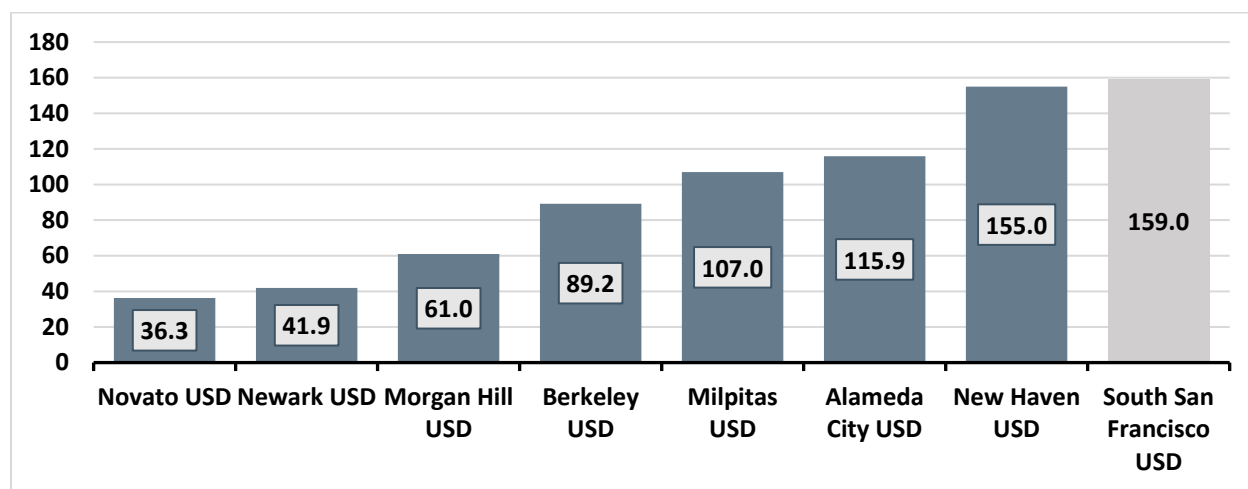
Figure 24: School-Age Teacher Staff, 2022-23



Source: 2022-23 PDR

When comparing classified staffing to the comparative group average, the instructional assistance FTE for the Program is at the top of the comparative group, as shown in Figure 25. Currently, the Program employs 118 classified assistance staff at the school-age level, most of whom are employed as 0.8 FTE. All classified staff who perform more than four hours of work receive District benefits. The Department indicates many of these positions (79 as of November 2023) are filled with contracted services employees and noted 17 vacancies. It should be noted, in comparison with the prior year to the current year shows that the Department had 159 staff in 2022-23 as reported on the PDR and has reduced positions down to 118 as of the December data analysis completed by SSC staff. At 118 classified staff members, the Program would be more in line with comparative group averages.

Figure 25: School-Age Instructional Assistance Staff, 2022-23



Source: 2022-23 PDR

There are discrepancies between the position control reports obtained via Business Services and HR, and tracking documents monitored by the Department, which is a recurrent theme in interviews with all departments. It is clear position control monitoring is an area of need for improvement by the District, as ongoing lack of calibration, positions filled with contractors without appropriate approvals, and vacancies on top of additional requests for staffing cause challenges with budgeting, fiscal reporting, and planning by the Program and the Business Services Department. Also, some positions providing classroom assistance are funded separately from the Program budget under the LCAP. However, it is clear there are many classified and contracted staff providing support to SWDs, and some Program staff and sites continue to request additional support for their students. It is critically important to ensure all positions filled, whether with employees or contracted providers, are appropriately requested, approved, and encumbered in the budget. Clear tracking of staff to ensure appropriate supervision, assignment to students or classrooms, and to monitor impact on the budget is a systemic need for the District and the Department. The reality is special education staffing needs are driven by IDEA mandates, assessed student needs, and influenced by staff and parent requests. Provision of additional staff can mitigate risks to the District by ensuring appropriate supervision and support for students with more extensive needs, but appropriate procedures must be followed, and approvals must be obtained within the District structure. Litigation risk will not be eliminated by filling positions immediately with underprepared and unqualified contracted service providers, and Program quality and capacity will be built with careful planning, onboarding, and support provision.

The Director has tried to counteract a site-level perception of support scarcity. The requests for additional classroom assistance—from site leaders, teachers, and families—were on a rising trend over the last two years. The Director determined a persistent belief that adding more classroom support will resolve identified needs existed, while parties acknowledged the personnel added were often not the right fit or do not provide the anticipated relief to the system. To interrupt this mindset, the Director increased the base support level provided to classrooms with more extensive support needs, or with a history of requesting substantial additional support. This strategy has been met with success, as some classrooms have reduced their requests for additional support, have decreased the number of classroom assistants from contracted providers, and most families are comfortable with the support available in their student's classrooms. There is room for improvement in this area, as evidenced by the continued number of staff, but it does appear some vacancies may remain unfilled as the perception of the need diminishes.

The Director is encouraged to continue consistent analysis of the quality of the services provided by contracted agencies, as well as the needs of a core level of assigned staff to ensure students have sufficient supervision and support from arrival to departure may influence assigned positions and the perceptions of support from staff and parents. Interviews indicated capacity-building and training for the support staff is needed, as staff indicated the students' behavioral needs were stretching the staff's skills in classrooms. New classified partners should have a minimum level of training, time to consult with the site administrator and the teacher and receive consultation to

ensure they are prepared to support the students in the classroom. The Department should consider the impact of placing additional support staff too quickly, as the presence of underprepared staff adds to the environmental perception of scarcity and need, rather than positively improving the support in the classroom. While a delay to add support staff may not be ideal, ensuring new supporters are sufficiently prepared may improve the outcomes for the Program and for students. Teachers and instructional support staff indicated a desire to have deeper knowledge of behavioral strategies, instructional strategies, and awareness of the needs of the students as related to the curricular choices occurring in the classroom settings.

Many districts are creating behavior support positions internally, which allows them to control the training, implementation, supervision, and assignment of duties for these staff. The District is encouraged to expand the in-house behavior support program, which may include Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) for supervision, and a cohort of trained behavior support providers, either from within the current cohort of instructional assistants, or as part of recruitment efforts. The District could utilize free training resources available online for capacity-building and supervision for employees available to support a broader range of student needs and classroom situations. Appendix D includes resources for free and low-cost training and resources to build a cadre of employee behavioral support aligned to the current and future needs of the District.

It is best practice to provide annual evaluative or supervisory consultation with the instructional assistants, and to periodically observe their practice, provide coaching and feedback, and ensure they have sufficient professional development to build their skills. The employee classified staff appear committed to their positions in the District and additional investment in expanding their skills and knowledge could be an excellent return on investment as well as increase positive student outcomes from their support. As the District establishes its cadre of instructional support, contractors are a great option for added flexibility by filling vacancies/absences as needed. To attract and retain high-quality talent, the District may want to consider adjusting classified positions, such as providing full-time employment, access to benefits and training, or other incentives for hard-to-fill job classifications.

Summary of Special Education Staffing

SSC staff examined data to include a comparative analysis of Program staff. Overall, in terms of Department staff, there may seem to be sufficient systemic support, but the sites and Program staff are calling for more. With a current vacancy in the Assistant Director position, creativity about what types of support the Program needs is encouraged, as additional Program Specialists or TOSAs may better serve the needs of the teaching staff. For related services staff, the District employs some of the highest FTE relative to the comparative group average, but caseloads, workloads, and the services delivered mean that the staffing is appropriate for the needs of the students. Although the District has been adding positions for instructional assistants and behavior support, the issue of vacancies, contracted service providers, and absences mean a site and Program

perception of scarcity persists. There may be opportunities for the Department to continue improving the staff's capacity and confidence.

Recommendations—Special Education Staffing

9. **Ensure monitoring and alignment of position control and position monitoring across the departments.** All positions must be appropriately requested, approved, and encumbered, whether filled by an employee or a contracted provider. Consistent, written communication regarding the procedures needed to extend the work hours or roles of existing employees, and about the procurement of contracted providers can ensure that the Program budget is accurate and aligned with District policy and procedures.
10. **Provide relevant and appropriate onboarding, training, and capacity-building to classified staff at all levels.** Invest in and build the skills and capacity of existing staff, including consultation time with their teachers, which may have short- and long-term implications for the District. Long-term, updated job classifications, salary and benefits, and recruitment and retention efforts may lead to higher pay for better work with employees who stay with the District. In the short term, providing better support may be achieved with consistent investments in training and time with the classroom teacher to ensure confidence and skill in meeting current student needs.
11. **Develop and provide an in-house behavioral support program.** Working to develop and implement a high-quality in-house program of behavioral support, with a supervising BCBA and a cadre of District trained staff can improve student services, classroom, and site environments, and reduce the requests and need for contracted providers.

Summary of Recommendations

The recommendations found throughout this report are summarized below (details on each recommendation can be found in the respective report section). SSC staff has categorized the recommendations as either short- or long-term. The short-term recommendations are those SSC staff believe the District could begin to implement in the subsequent fiscal year while the long-term recommendations are those the District can undertake over the next two to five years.

In addition, SSC staff recognize these recommendations have fiscal implications—some in terms of staff time and resources and others that will require actual expenditure of District funds, depending on the availability of those funds, or feasibility of expending funds given fiscal realities of the District. SSC staff recognize schools continue to operate facing challenges with recruitment, hiring, and retention. As such, the list of key recommendations is not only categorized by short- and long-term, but also includes a notation for those recommendations that would necessitate new budgetary expenditures (though SSC staff is aware many of the recommendations will require a

reassignment of resources in terms of staff time, etc.), so the District can take the lead to strategically consider the feasibility, availability of funds, and the alignment with the strategic plan and other initiatives when developing its priorities.

Implementation Period	Recommendations	Fiscal Impact
Organizational Structure and Effectiveness		
Short-term	Establish clear policy, procedure, and communication protocols across the District.	
Short-term	Continue to reinforce, communicate, and consistently implement clear and concise policies and procedures.	
Short-term	Continue PD opportunities and expansion of needed behavioral and mental health services.	X
Long-term	Take a more active role in the implementation and distribution of programs, including inclusive practices and access.	
Long-term	Assess the space needs of the Department and Program and develop long-term plans to support space and location needs.	X
Special Education Revenues and Expenditures		
Short-term	Develop a formalized and collaborative budget development and monitoring process, aligned to the budget process followed by other departments, programs, and sites.	
Short-term	Review the funding and work assigned for all staff particularly those paid using special education resources and goals.	
Short-term	Continue to implement and refine District transportation policies and procedures.	
Long-term	Consider hiring a core number of full-time instructional aides to help with staff retention, improve turnover rates, and improve support to the Program. ¹	X
Special Education Cost Drivers		
Long-term	Implement an MTSS with fidelity.	
Long-term	Consider building capacity and extending the hours of staff to provide instructional and behavioral support. ¹	X
Long-term	Train staff to consistently implement an SST process and monitor the results of Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions	
Comparative Analysis of Special Education Staffing		
Short-term	Ensure monitoring and alignment of position control and position monitoring across the departments.	
Long-term	Provide relevant and appropriate onboarding, training, and capacity building to classified staff at all levels.	X
Short-term	Develop and provide an in-house behavioral support program.	X

¹Recommendations addressing the same outcome, pertaining to hiring/increasing the number of hours of instructional aides, divided among corresponding and relevant report sections

Appendix A—Recommendations from 2017 School Services of California Inc. Study

1. **Eliminate all duties relative to general education from the Director position.** The oversight of the Section 504s as well as the Coordinated Early Intervention Strategies are examples of general education duties that are placed upon the Special Education Department (Department). These duties should be overseen and conducted through the Educational Services Department in consultation with the Department when necessary.
2. **Increase Department full-time equivalency.** The level of Department staffing is inadequate in light of the challenges facing the Department. The Director has demonstrated the ability to evaluate the urgency and importance of numerous and competing demands and is balancing priorities accordingly. The South San Francisco Unified School District (District) should consider adding at least one-half Program Specialist and a full-time technical assistant to help with the administrative workload as well as to oversee and manage student records.
3. **Review Individual Education Program (IEP) procedures for adding transportation.** Utilize a decision tree or specific process when adding transportation to the IEP. This will help to ensure that students are being provided the opportunity for increased independence and mobility by fading transportation services as independence increases.
4. **Inclusion of the Transportation Director in communications.** Include the Transportation Director in discussions and prior to decisions being made regarding bell schedules and any other instances that increase transportation demand.
5. **Eliminate any items that are not special education from the special education budget.** There are services being provided by special education staff that should not be charged to the resources for special education. The District should review the budget and position control to ensure that only the actual services for special education are charged to the special education budget.
6. **Develop training modules in Keenan Safe Schools.** The Keenan Safe Schools training modules are available for myriad of topics from the mandated topics that are covered each year for all employees to the very specific job-related topics such as Exceptional Child training. As a no cost training resource, we recommend the District further develop and utilize this resource for specific job categories related to working with special education students, including, but not limited to, special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals.
7. **Develop and implement Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).** The growth in students with disabilities (SWDs) experienced by the District is reflective of the growth we've seen

statewide. Additionally, the percentage of students with the primary disability of specific learning disability (SLD) is of some concern and suggests that, while the overall percentage of SWDs is below the average of the group, the District may be over identifying students as SLD. The District should implement MTSS and ensure they are consistently implemented. The District should track pre-referral interventions and Student Study Team (SST) data to ensure they are effective. The District should also ensure that existing assessment and identification practices are implemented consistently and with fidelity. Lastly, the District should provide a broader continuum of options, particularly options that provide a significant amount of time in general education.

8. **Implement co-teaching at secondary level.** There is not a culture of inclusion District-wide. However, principals are open and supportive about having a co-teaching model. Local educational agencies today are expected to provide a full continuum of placement options, such as co-teaching. We recommend the District support the implementation of co-teaching at the secondary level.
9. **Develop written policies and procedures.** Policies and procedures should be developed, communicated to all staff, and implemented with consistency. Systems of accountability for rule compliance must also be developed. The procedures manual should provide staff with guidance related to transportation for students with an IEP, chairing the IEP, communicating with general education teachers following the annual IEP review meeting, recommending a more restrictive placement, requesting additional aide time and one-to-one instructional assistants, and when and whom to call for behavior intervention support. In the short term, this may require some temporary clerical support.
10. **Increase Department full-time equivalents.** The Director has demonstrated the ability to evaluate the urgency and importance of numerous and competing demands and is balancing priorities accordingly. The District should consider adding at least one-half Program Specialist to help with the administrative workload as well as adding at least one full-time technical support person to oversee and manage student records.
11. **Move Paraprofessional Academy workday in November.** We recommend moving the Paraprofessional Academy workday from the summer (before the start of school) to November as a regular workday. Furthermore, consider online training that doesn't require having substitutes or a full day of release.
12. **Expand self-contained classrooms to more campuses.** We recommend doing an analysis to expand self-contained classrooms to more campuses. If there are not enough students for a full class, consider hiring a mental health therapist to provide support at the elementary level.
13. **A program transfer is not recommended at this time.** Although we recommend that the District perform a program transfer of county office of education classes, the Director cannot

do it as he needs more support than the current Department staff. The Department does not have the time that would be required to conduct an in depth look at the District's current organizational capacity or to evaluate its feasibility.

14. **Establish requirements for IEP meetings.** Require site administrators to attend IEP meetings for the entire meeting and hold them accountable.
15. **Provide training for general education and site administrators on special education legal requirements.**
16. **Establish meetings with Department and special education school site staff.** We recommend that the Department meet with special education school site staff on a regular basis to focus on special education and not so much on general education unless general education is focusing on serving the needs of special education students.
17. **Track pre-referral interventions.** We recommend that the District track students referred by parents, how many had an SST, and how many are found eligible or ineligible for special education services. This will assist the District in determining the effectiveness of pre-referral interventions and the SST process. It would also be wise to track the data by school site. Similarly, we recommend that the District track the number of students referred by teachers and by the SST who were found eligible or ineligible for special education. Without this accompanying data, it is difficult to determine the impact of SSTs and pre-referral interventions are having on referral rates.
18. **Standardize technology and establish workspace at each school site.** The District should have a standard of the technology and space needed for itinerant staff to ensure uniform access to the necessary tools for the assignments at every site.
19. **Add Program Specialists to Department.** This is an area where the District needs more support in its Department. Additional Program Specialists are needed to support the Director in implementing Department procedures, supporting implementation of professional development programs, and managing day-to-day Department operations, allowing the Director the time that will be needed to effectively lead the Department.

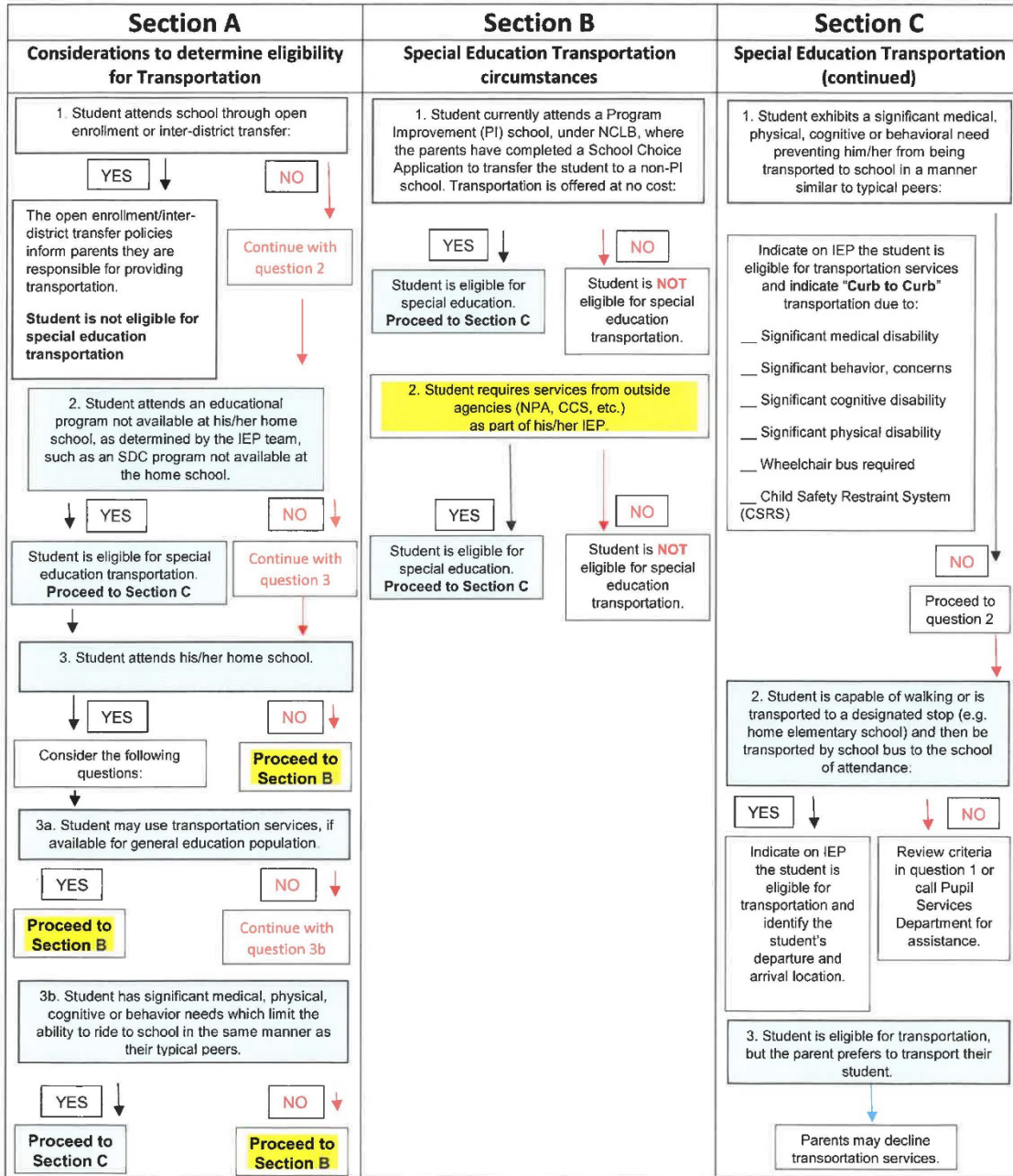
Appendix B—Sample Decision Making Trees

Sample 1—Transportation Eligibility Criteria Flowchart



Orange Unified School District
Transportation Department

Transportation Eligibility Criteria FLOWCHART



Sample 2—Transportation Eligibility Checklist



Transportation Eligibility Checklist

Name: _____ Date of IEP: _____ D.O.B. _____

The IEP Team will consider student needs including, but not limited to:

Medical Diagnosis and Health Needs:

Does the student have significant limitations in strength, vitality, or alertness that prevents him/her from riding the regular bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student have a medically fragile condition that prevents them from riding the regular school bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student have special medical equipment that must be transported on a specialized school bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Physical Needs:

Does the student have a wheelchair requiring a special securement system on the school bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student have a visual impairment that prevents them from riding the regular school bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Safety Needs:

Does the student's disability or level of functioning prevent them from being able to travel to school independently?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student's disability or level of functioning prevent them from being able to travel to and wait independently at a regular school bus stop?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Behavioral Needs:

Does the student have a behavior plan that requires certain transportation services?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Is the student's behavior, after implementing behavior plan, so severe that they cannot ride the regular school bus?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Program Location:

Is the student required to attend a program outside of the district of residence geographic boundary?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Does the student require special transportation to access services designated on the IEP (e.g., occupational therapy, physical therapy, mental health-related service, etc.)?*

☐ Yes ☐ No

**Other needs may also be taken into consideration when the IEP team discusses a student's placement and transportation needs.*

Appendix C— California Department of Education Transportation Guidelines¹

Local Educational Agency (LEA) Rules and Policies

All pupils, including those receiving specialized instruction and services, are subject to the rules and policies governing regular transportation offerings within the LEA, unless the specific needs of the eligible pupil or the location of the special education program/service dictate that special education transportation is required.

Primary Consideration: Pupil Needs

The specific needs of the pupil must be the primary consideration when an IEP team is determining any transportation needs. These may include, but are not limited to:

1. Medical diagnosis and health needs consideration of whether long bus rides could affect a certain pupil's health (duration, temperature control, need for services, health emergencies); general ability and/or strength to ambulate/wheel; approximate distance from school or the distance needed to walk or wheel oneself to the school; consideration of pupil needs in inclement or hot weather, other.
2. Physical accessibility of curbs, sidewalks, streets, and public transportation systems.
3. Consideration of a pupil's capacity to arrive at school on time, to avoid getting lost, to avoid dangerous traffic situations, and to avoid other potentially dangerous or exploitative situations on the way to and from school.
4. Behavioral Intervention Plans (Education Code Sections [EC §] 56520-56525) specified by the pupil's IEP and consideration of how to implement such plans while a pupil is being transported.
5. Mid-day or other transportation needs as required on a pupil's IEP (for example, occupational or physical therapy or mental health services at another site, community-based classes, etc.) must also be taken into consideration when the IEP team discusses a pupil's placement and transportation needs.
6. Extended school year services, pursuant to EC § 56345(b)(3), should be another consideration of a pupil's need for transportation if considered necessary to provide a free appropriate public education as specified in a pupil's IEP.

¹ www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/lr/trnsprtgdlns.asp

Transportation Staff and IEP Team Meetings

Effective practice requires that procedures are developed for communication with transportation personnel and that transportation staff are present at IEP team meetings when the pupil needs the use of adaptive or assistive equipment, when school bus equipment is required to be modified, when the pupil exhibits severe behavioral difficulties and a behavior intervention plan is to be implemented, when the pupil is medically fragile and requires special assistance, and/or when the pupil has other unique needs.

Transportation Options

Considering the identified needs of the pupil, transportation options may include, but not be limited to: walking, riding the regular school bus, utilizing available public transportation (any out-of-pocket costs to the pupil or parents are reimbursed by the LEA), riding a special bus from a pick up point, and portal-to-portal special education transportation via a school bus, taxi, reimbursed parent's driving with a parent's voluntary participation, or other mode as determined by the IEP team. When developing specific IEP goals and objectives related to the pupil's use of public transportation, the IEP team may wish to consider a blend of transportation services as the pupil's needs evolve. Specialized transportation, as a related service, must be written on the pupil's IEP with specificity and should be approved by the transportation administrator. It is recommended that services be described in sufficient enough detail to inform the parties of how, when, and from where-to-where transportation will be provided and, where arrangements for the reimbursement of parents are required, the amount and frequency of reimbursement.

Suspension from the School Bus

Occasionally pupils receiving special education services are suspended from bus transportation (EC § 48900-48927 Suspension or Expulsion). The suspension of a pupil receiving special education services from California transportation can constitute a meaningful change of placement if the district: 1) has been transporting the student; 2) suspends the student from transportation as a disciplinary measure; and 3) does not provide another mode of transportation (Office of Civil Rights, Letter of Finding Complaint No. 04-89-1236, December 8, 1989).

A meaningful change in placement requires a meeting of the IEP team to review the pupil's IEP. During the period of any exclusion from bus transportation, pupils must be provided with an alternative form of transportation at no cost to the pupil or parent or guardian to be assured of having access to the required Special Education instruction and services (EC § 48915.5).

EC § 48915.5(c) reads:

If an individual with exceptional needs is excluded from school bus transportation, the pupil is entitled to be provided with an alternative form of transportation at no

cost to the pupil, parent, or guardian if transportation is specified in the pupil's individualized education program. (AB [Assembly Bill] 1859, Chapter 492, Statutes of 2002 as amended by AB 685, Chapter 56, Statutes of 2007.)

Appendix D—Growing Behavior Support Capacity

Remove Barriers and Hire Behavior Support Staff

- Local educational agencies should identify staff who are interested in developing increased skills and capacity to implement behavior technician duties
- Craft job and program descriptions to capture the critical behavior support functions and components students need in the classroom
- Align training and capacity-building with the structures of the registered or certification programs
- Have confidence in the skills of employees and offer internal versus contracted services
- Offer paid training
- Increase job classification, salary, benefits
- Increase full-time equivalence to meet system needs
- Invest in ongoing training and supervision
- Build internal systems and teams to ensure support and service effectiveness
- Pay for certification and testing
- Sample [Job Description for Behaviorist](#)

Registered Behavior Technician (RBT)

- Created by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) in 2014
- Nationally recognized certification in behavior analysis for instructional assistants or paraprofessionals
- Requires 40 hours of training, a certification test, and supervision and direction by a Board Certified Behavior Analyst
- [RBT Task List \(2nd ed.\) \(bacb.com\)](#)
- RBT Task List (2nd ed.) is foundation for 40-hour training modules

- Board Certified Autism Technicians (BCATs)
- Created in 2014 by the [Behavior Intervention Certification Council](#)
- BCATs are similar to RBTs with an Autism focus
- Demonstrates Autism-specific competency and training, with increasing levels of independence
- Involves certification exams, adherence to a code of conduct, and annual recertification
- Requires 40 hours of training, 15 hours of experience, a certification test, and ongoing supervision and direction
- [BCAT Certification](#)

Role of the RBT/BCAT

- Work one on one with students
- Direct behavior-analytic services
- Use of applied behavior analysis
- Implementation of behavior plans
- Support for skill development and maintenance
- Data collection
- Assisting with assessments
- Provision of training under supervision

Training Opportunities

[Autism Partnership Foundation's FREE 40-Hour Registered Behavior Technician](#)

- Free BACB-approved training
- Additional training resources for working with Autism are available for very low cost
- The training can be used for professional development without obtaining an RBT
- There are 17 modules, completed online, with materials and a quiz for each section

Relias Academy's RBT Series

- RBT training series is \$99
 - Includes practice exams
 - Includes 26 course components
- Accredited continuing education provided for many related services

IRIS Center—Vanderbilt

- Over 60 free professional development modules
- Available in English and Spanish
- Adult learning practices
- Developing reflective practice
- Safe space for mistakes
- Coaching and feedback
- [IRIS Resource Locator](#)
- [Evidence-Based Practice Summaries](#)
- [High-Leverage Practices](#)
- [Films](#)
- [Children's Books](#)
- [Professional development activities, planning forms, & more](#)
- [Latest modules & resources](#)
- [IRIS Archived Resources](#)

Visit the [California UDL Coalition's](#) YouTube Channel

- Free Novak Education Universal Design for Learning (UDL) online classes
- Take advantage of the Novak Education UDL

- [Supporting Inclusive Practices](#) to learn more
- [How to Register for a Novak Education Course](#)
- UDL Now! Course
- Equity by Design
- Bridging the Gap Between Special Education and General Education
- How Social-Emotional Learning and UDL Intersect
- Leaning Into Literacy
- Universally Designing Professional Learning Communities
- Leaning and the Brain
- Foster Deeper Learning Outcomes for Your Students
- Innovate Inside the (Virtual) Box
 - Online By Design
 - Inclusive Practices in the Science Classroom
 - Mathematics for Everyone: UDL for Elementary Mathematics
 - Mathematics for All: UDL for Middle School

California Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) and Paraeducators

- Welcome to the CA MTSS and Paraeducators course!
- To learn more about how to progress through this course, the learning objectives, and the course requirements, **please start with the** [Course Overview](#)

Relevant Education Code

- Education Code Section 45390(b) states that because classified school employees are working to ensure the safety and care of pupils on school sites, they need professional development and training to update skills and to learn the best practices for education programs, including safety, academic achievement and curriculum standards, special education . . . including training and staff development on the best practices to meet the needs of special education pupils and to comply with any new state and federal mandates

Appendix E—Abbreviations

AA	African American
ADA	Average Daily Attendance
AUT	Autism
BACB	Behavior Analyst Certification Board
BCAT	Board Certified Autism Technician
BCBA	Board Certified Behavior Analyst
CALPADS	California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System
CCEIS	Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services
CDE	California Department of Education
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
Dashboard	California School Dashboard
Department	Special Education Department
Director	Director of Special Education
District	South San Francisco Unified School District
EC §	Education Code Section
ED	Emotional Disturbance
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
FAPE	free appropriate public education
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
HH	Hard of Hearing
HR	Human Resources
HTS	Home-to-School
ID	Intellectual Disability
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Program
LCAP	Local Control and Accountability Plan
LCFF	Local Control Funding Formula
LEA	Local Educational Agency
LRE	least restrictive environment
MD	Multiple Disabilities
MOE	Maintenance of Effort
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports
NPS	Nonpublic School
OHI	Other Health Impairment
OI	Orthopedic Impairment
PD	Professional Development
PDR	Personnel Data Report
Program	Special Education Program
RBT	Registered Behavior Technician
SACS	Standardized Account Code Structure

SAI	Specialized Academic Instruction
SEIS	Special Education Information Systems
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
SELPA	Special Education Local Plan Area
SLD	Specific Learning Disability
SLI	Speech or language impairment
SLP	Speech-Language Pathologist
SSC	School Services of California Inc.
SST	Student Study Team
SWD	Student with Disabilities
TK	Transitional Kindergarten
TOSA	Teacher of Special Assignment
USD	Unified School District