



SpEd Edition

Sweetwater Union High School District
Special Services Department



Message from The Director

By Michelle Sturm-Gonzalez



In the journey of secondary education, we often focus on the "what" of learning—the credits, the grades, and the graduation requirements. But as Director of Special Services, I want to pivot our focus to the "who": the vital, life-changing connections our students form with one another.

For adolescents, school isn't just a place for academics; it is the primary arena for identity formation. Research shows that a sense of social belonging is the strongest predictor of academic success and emotional well-being. When students feel they belong, they don't just "get through" the day—they thrive.

This semester, we are moving beyond simple "inclusion" (being in the same room) toward integration (being part of the same community). To do this, we are prioritizing several research-based models:

- Unified Sports & Clubs: Breaking down barriers through shared goals and teamwork.
- Peer Buddies: Moving from "help" to "friendship," ensuring every student has a social circle that values their presence.



- The Paraeducator & Teacher Partnership: Instead of being a "buffer" between a student and their peers, our staff are bridge-builders, intentionally stepping back to allow spontaneous peer interactions to flourish.

We've all seen the "lonely lunch" or the student who sits on the periphery of a group project. These aren't just social hiccups; they are barriers to equity.

I am asking every school site to define one to two specific, peer-centered changes to implement this semester. What does the current morning drop-off, nutrition break, or lunch look like for a particular group of students? Do they have minimal interaction with other students on campus for their benefit or is it more convenient? Is this necessary for all, if only one student truly needs to have a different approach?

Belonging doesn't happen by accident. It happens by design. I am incredibly proud of the empathy this district shows every day, and I look forward to seeing how we deepen these bonds together.

Warmly,

Michelle



Stephen Dillon **SpEd Mentor & Site Support**

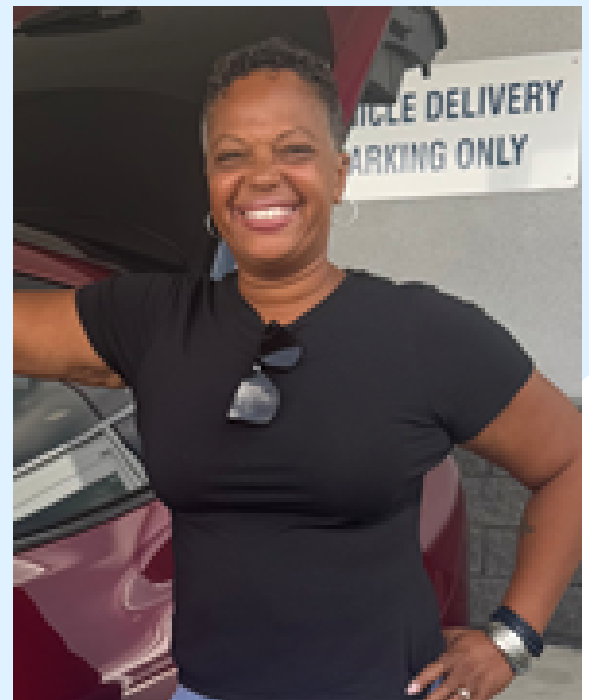
With over 20 years in the Sweetwater Union High School District—along with seven years in San Diego Unified and three years at The Institute for Effective Education—Stephen is a seasoned educator dedicated to student growth and advocacy. In his new role, he'll mentor special education interns, support substitute vacancies, and assist teachers with IEP compliance. He holds both Multiple Subject and Special Education credentials and a Master's degree in Education, and his teaching is grounded in the belief that "Every student can learn, just not on the same day or in the same way." — George Evans. Outside of school, you'll likely find Stephen traveling, skiing, geocaching, volunteering with Team Rubicon, or spending time with family and friends.

Leana Dillon
SpEd Mentor & Site Support

With 26 years of experience in the Sweetwater Union High School District—including a quarter-century at Chula Vista Middle along with three years at The Institute for Effective Education—Leana is a veteran educator dedicated to student advocacy. In her new role, she will mentor special education interns, support substitute vacancies, and assist teachers with IEP compliance. Leana is highly qualified with credentials in both English and Special Education, and a Master’s degree in Education. Her teaching heart is rooted in the belief that “Kids do well if they can!” – Dr. Ross Greene. Outside of school, you’ll likely find Leana traveling to a new destination, doing crafts, or curled up with a good book. She loves spending time with her family, pets, and friends. Reach out any time—you’ll always be greeted with a smile!



I am a San Diego native who has worked in education for 25 years with the last 10 ten years teaching at Sweetwater High School. I have had the pleasure of wearing many hats in education-including English teacher, SPED teacher, restorative teacher and most recently as a TOSA with Charting My Path. No matter my role, my passion has always been the same: fighting for the underdog especially for students with disabilities. I believe every student deserves to see a future that’s bigger than what they may have been exposed to, and I’m deeply committed to helping students discover college and career options, especially when those pathways aren’t always visible at home or in their communities. In my free time I enjoy spending time with my family, life coaching my adult children (who rarely take my advice) and purchasing and assembling my latest must-have Amazon gadget.



Neco Thompson-Badu
Resource Teacher



Rosalba Jaime
Office Assistant II

I started my employment at SUHSD as a substitute in different departments and capacity such as: Clerical, Instructional Assistant, and Library Tech Substitute; then, I was hired at MVA as Campus Assistant in October of 2013. Now I am pleased to join the Special Education department after several attempts on different interviews for different positions (3/4). I am also part of the Interpretation Unit where I provide interpretation for parents during evening meetings. Throughout my time at SUHSD, I have valued collaboration, learning, and supporting students and staff. I enjoy spending time with family and friends, movies, theater, walking, hiking and traveling.

I am joining the Special Services Department after 15 years of experience working with students with special needs. Throughout my career, I have been deeply committed to supporting students and strengthening connections with the community. After serving as a Community Relations Facilitator, I bring a well-rounded perspective and genuine passion for helping others. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue serving the community through Special Services and feels truly blessed to work under the leadership and guidance of Ms.

Josafat

and Dr. Walter. Outside of work, I enjoy traveling, attending church, and spending time with my family, especially with my two adorable grandchildren.



Mónica Meza
Student Program Facilitator



My name is Sarai Garcia-Puga and I have been at the District for 20 years. I am honored now to be the new Senior Administrative Assistant at the Special Services Department. In this role, I will provide vital administrative and operational support to ensure programs and services for students with specialized needs are delivered efficiently and with care. I bring a well-rounded background to this position, having previously worked at multiple sites within the district. These experiences gave me a strong understanding of school operations, staff needs, and student support services, which continue to form my work today. I am a proud product of the district, having graduated from Sweetwater High School My personal connection to the district and commitment to public education continue to drive my work in support of the school community. Outside of work, I balance time at sporting events with friends and family.

Sarai Garcia-Puga
Senior Administrator Assistant

"My goal is for every student to walk into school feeling excited and capable." I have been with Sweetwater Union High School District for 16 years and have taught Summer Reading Clinic the past ten years. I am excited to have been hired as the district's new Reading Intervention Specialist.

I join the team with a focus on supporting students across our campuses in mastering reading fluency and comprehension. My inspiration stems from a passion for turning the "struggle" of reading into a source of joy. By providing tailored strategies and encouragement, I hope to foster an environment where students don't just read because they have to, but because they want to. I am thrilled to begin this journey and I am thankful for the warm welcome from the Sweetwater Union High School District family.



Joy Melendrez
Reading Clinic Coordinator



Supporting Inclusive Classrooms, Together

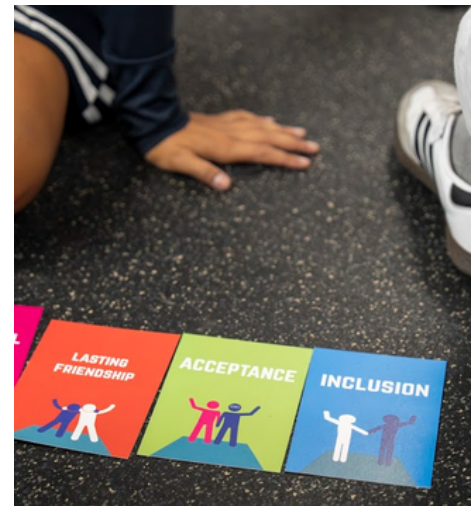
By Kitty Cancino & Jessica Suchma

We are excited to share our Special Education Toolkit, a districtwide resource designed to support teachers in creating inclusive, effective learning environments for all students. This comprehensive toolkit includes practical instructional strategies, user-friendly templates, and essential guidance to support diverse learners across all classrooms.

Our goal is to ensure every educator has access to tools and resources that promote student success. Whether you are looking to strengthen instruction, implement accommodations with confidence, or enhance classroom systems and management, the Special Education Toolkit offers ready-to-use supports to meet your needs.

The Special Education Toolkit is now available and can be accessed through the link provided. We encourage all staff to explore the toolkit and consider how these resources can be integrated into daily instruction and planning.

If you have questions or would like additional support, we are happy to collaborate and support you in using the toolkit. Thank you for your continued commitment to inclusive practices and meaningful learning experiences for every student.



4 Simple Ways to Foster Meaningful Respect at Work

1. Pay attention to the details.

Words like *please* and *thank you* are simple but effective places to start. Bolster these with genuine consideration. For example, if you say something considerate like, “Please let me know if I’ve offended you,” make sure to thoughtfully listen to the response, and if you’ve made a misstep, sincerely take responsibility for it and apologize.



2. Be nonjudgmental.



Really. Maybe even with a little dash of empathy. This tip comes straight from the CPI playbook. It’s easy to use our personal frame of reference to judge others, so setting our own experiences, values, and opinions aside is essential to demonstrating respect. What if, instead of rushing to criticize, we opted for curiosity?
A curious mind is an open one.

3. Don’t be afraid to ask questions—and to ask for permission to show support.

It’s not for us to decide what other people should or shouldn’t be okay with—but asking questions, seeking permission to respond supportively, and genuinely listening can help us learn.



4. Surrender your ego.



We aren't going to be liked or respected by everyone we encounter—and while that can be a tough thing to accept, embracing that reality makes life immensely easier. At the end of the day, I want to know that I treated people with respect. If I learn I haven't, I don't want to respond defensively because my ego is bruised. I want to respond with curiosity and gratitude. Letting go of my ego opens the potential for me to change my behavior so that I can better provide for the emotional safety of others.

Improving IEP Documentation

by Lilia Maciejewski, Special Ed Technician

Q1: What is the current issue regarding staff signature pages?

A: There is a high frequency of missing staff signature pages. While parent signatures are tracked and noted if missing, staff members who are present at the meeting are failing to sign the document before it is submitted.

Q2: How are date errors on IEPs being handled?

A: Currently, many IEPs are submitted with incorrect dates (often due to using old templates). When these errors are identified, requests for a correction amendment are being sent to providers, but these requests are frequently going unaddressed.

Q3: What are the challenges regarding communication with providers?

A: There is a significant lapse in email responsiveness. Staff members are reporting that emails regarding missing documentation or necessary corrections are being ignored, which stalls the compliance process.

Q4: Why can't electronic signatures be seen by everyone on SEIS?

A: When an IEP is signed electronically, signatures are initially visible only to the issuing provider. To ensure the Special Education Technician and other staff can view the signatures, the provider must first accept and download the completed document.

SELF CARE

- **EAT WELL**
- **SLEEP WELL**
- **MOVE WELL**

by Sergio Zamora, LKNFT, ERMHS

Many times, people overthink what it takes to develop resiliency to address the ups and downs of life. The market is flooded with tons of self-help books, Tic-Tok videos on managing stress, and constant advertising for therapeutic support. Using the motto of “Eat-well, Sleep-well, Move-well” I have been able to educate students and parents on how we can activate our built-in “self-defense shield” against the struggles of everyday life, and move toward emotional wellness.

“Eat-well”: Having the proper nutrition via a healthy-balanced diet helps us have the fuel for long workdays, participate in meetings that seem to go on forever, and still feel alert to take care of the never-ending responsibilities at home. Similarly, making time to eat, avoiding becoming “hangry” is also very important as we all know that one person to stay away from until they have had their lunch.

“Sleep-well”: Getting enough sleep to make sure we feel rested will do away with having to go for that third cup of coffee at 10am. So, make sure to get your sleep, so you won’t have to wait for the weekend to “sleep all day”.

“Move-well”- Time to put that “Apple Watch” to work by engaging in physical activity so you can move with the strength and energy needed for everyday life.

So, by engaging in the concept of “Eat-well, Sleep-well, Move-well” we prepare our minds and bodies to take on unforeseen events that are sure to happen, and avoid emotional distress that can have long lasting effects on our lives.

Bite of Reality

Bite of Reality is an app-based financial simulation that drops students into “Adulthood.” For 90 minutes, students take on a job, paycheck, and realistic expenses as they navigate stations like housing, food, and transportation while making tough (and sometimes unexpected) budgeting choices. With a few curveballs thrown in, students discover that money management is harder than it looks. Sponsored by a credit union, Bite of Reality is an engaging, interactive way to build real-world financial literacy and spark great classroom conversations.

Student takeaways:

“I will never ask my parents for a \$300 Lego set again.”

“Expensive is not always better, especially on a budget.”

“What most surprised me was how expensive daycare is for children.”



Want to host a no-cost Bite of Reality simulation at your school site?

Contact: Will Rivera
wrivera@calcoastcu.org

by Kristina Josafat, TPP Employment Specialist



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