

SPUSD SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION: A FORUM FOR COLLABORATION

South Pasadena Council PTA Special Needs Committee Report Parent Input from the October 17, 2013 Program, SPUSD Special Needs Education: A Forum for Collaboration

December 2, 2013

Introduction: On October 17, 2013, the South Pasadena Council PTA Special Needs Committee (the Committee), in partnership with SPUSD (South Pasadena Unified School District, or the District), held the titled program to solicit parent/guardian feedback about the special education services provided by the District. This is the fourth time this Forum has been held; previous Forums were held in 2007, 2009, and 2011.

To publicize the event, flyers were mailed directly to parents/guardians of students with special needs three weeks before the Forum. Flyers were also distributed electronically twice: at one month and at two weeks before the Forum. Resource specialists at the three elementary schools were asked to distribute Forum flyers. The Forum was publicized in all PTA weekly newsletters in the months of September and October, SPUSD's website, and the Committee's website at www.spp4snc.com. The Forum flyer and Forum questionnaire were also mailed multiple times electronically to the Special Needs Support Group email list during September and October.

The Forum was held in the SPUSD boardroom. About 25 parents were in attendance. District staff and School Board members were also in attendance to hear the comments from the parents/guardians. Four principals and one assistant principal attended.

The goal of the Forum was to record input from interested parents/guardians of children with special needs, and then to pass the input to the School Board, District staff and to the South Pasadena Council PTA Special Needs Committee for review. All groups can then use this input to work together to take action to improve the District's services and ways of working with students with special needs and their families. There was no intent to evaluate the accuracy of the comments, to obtain data scientifically, or to take action on the input.

The meeting began with introductory remarks from Lourdes Nonato, Chair of the South Pasadena Council PTA Special Needs Committee, Joel Shapiro, SPUSD Superintendent, and Kendra Rose, SPUSD Director of Special Education.

Attendees then divided up into five breakout groups, with a trained facilitator (Committee member) and a recorder (District personnel) assigned to each group. District staff and School Board members either situated themselves with a group or moved around to each group to listen to the input being given.

The groups each addressed two different questions:

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?
2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

Time was allotted for brainstorming and to record answers. Individuals in each group then prioritized the answers with stickers. As a wrap-up, the groups came together and facilitators summarized comments from each of the groups. Attendees were also asked to complete and submit evaluation forms. The agenda and evaluation form for the Forum are included as Attachments A and B.

2013 Summary of Comments:

Comments from each of the five individual breakout groups begin on page 5 of this report and are listed in order of priority in bold type under the questions. Compared to previous Forums, the number of parents/guardians that attended this Forum was the smallest (approximately 25 parents were in attendance). Consequently, the comments and suggestions from each group represent only a small number of people, with the exception of the Preschool Special Day Class group, which included 10 parents. The number of parents in each breakout group is listed in each section below the name of the group. Overall, the Committee is pleased to report that the feedback collected from this Forum was generally positive. Parents/Guardians seemed to feel that staff members, particularly special education teachers and staff, were doing well and attending to the needs of students in special education.

The following are some of the common themes among the groups:

1. ***The need for more general education teacher and staff training.*** Parents felt that general education teachers and classified staff need more training on working with students with special needs.
2. ***Improved communication.*** Teachers and all District staff should provide timely responses to questions. Staff should also improve their use of websites, email, newsletters, etc. The District should develop a systematic communication policy and plan (the District had a 48-hour response time to inquiries from parents and guardians; is it still in effect and being implemented?).
3. ***Improved social skills support.*** Social skills programs need to be developed and implemented for students with special needs. District staff and ALL students also need to be made aware of the social differences of students with special needs.

2013 Recommendations for the District:

The Committee has the following suggestions for the District to implement:

1. The District should provide ongoing research-based special education training for all District staff to ensure that current best practices are being utilized and implemented in the curriculum. In particular, general education teachers and staff should be trained to identify and address the needs of all students with learning differences. This should include knowledge of the IEP process and the legalities of implementing the IEP.
2. The District should expand the current SED (Special Education Department) Communication Plan. The District should enforce timely and appropriate responses to questions from parents, students, and families. The District plan should also include regular communication regarding classroom curriculum and school activities to keep parents informed. This is particularly relevant for non-verbal students and NPS (Non-Public School)/SELPA (Special Education Local Planning Area) families.
3. The District should develop and implement social skills programs that address the needs of students with special needs. These programs should provide typical modeling for students with special needs, education for the typical student population, social skills for all, and should foster friendships among peers.

Previous Forums:

This is the fourth Forum hosted by the Committee, with previous efforts held in 2007 (over 50 parent attendees), 2009 (over 30 parent attendees), and 2011 (over 50 parent attendees). For reference, the previous summary of comments and corresponding suggestions are included as Attachments C, D, and E. Results from previous Forums have influenced some of the following positive improvements:

- SPUSD Student Study Team Referral Process Flowchart and the IEP Process Flowchart were developed and are posted on the SPUSD website.
- SPUSD Special Education Department Procedures for Communication with parents/guardians of students with special needs were developed, distributed to families of students with special needs in SPUSD by direct mail, posted on the SPUSD website, and are being implemented.
- A parent/guardian of a student with special needs is a member of each of the School Site Councils in SPUSD.
- SPUSD addressed the concerns regarding the need for smaller class size and appropriate instruction for students in Special Day Class (SDC) at Monterey Hills Elementary School by forming two separate SDC classrooms, as opposed to having all grades (K-5) served in one classroom.
- The Committee and SPUSD sponsored special needs conferences to educate the community in 2011 and 2013; a special needs conference is currently being planned for March 2014.

Abbreviations:

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

IEP: Individualized Education Program

NPS: Non-Public School

PTA: Parent-Teacher Association

ROP: Regional Occupational Program

RSP: Resource Specialist Program

SDC: Special Day Class

SED: Special Education Department

SELPA: Special Education Local Planning Area

SPUSD: South Pasadena Unified School District

Infant/Preschool SDC (with NPS/SELPA)

(Number of parents in group: 10)

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?

1. A good amount of services
2. Collaborative team approach between specialists
3. Highly-skilled professionals
4. Caring and nurturing towards children
5. Communications through newsletters by preschool SDC teachers
6. Get to know one another; family-like relationships are formed
7. Willingness to work with government agencies
8. Supports students with multi-handicaps through other agencies

2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

1. **Toilet/Restroom in the classroom**
 - a. **Use savings from bond money to build a restroom**
 - b. **Additional portable restroom on campus**
 - c. **Put 2 portables with shared play space and restroom in District Parking Lot to house 1 SDC preschool and 1 general education SPUSD preschool**
 - d. **Present to South Pasadena redevelopment to include portables**
2. **More opportunities for inclusion**
 - a. **Move SDC room next to (closer to) general education SPUSD preschool room**
 - b. **Team teaching with general education**
 - c. **Pay for 2 or 3 slots in the general education preschool for mainstreaming**
 - d. **Social skills group with general education and children with special needs**

- e. Circle of friends using ROP students to facilitate**
- f. Extended Day Care to accept children with special needs**
- 3. Educate typical students about children with special needs**
- 4. Special education background and training for support staff
- 5. Consistency of support staff (aides are pulled and replaced by various substitutes)
- 6. Improved transitioning to next levels (opportunities, education, preparation)
- 7. Facilitate a sense of community
- 8. Parent opportunities to advocate for SDC program to the District
- 9. Preschool SDC at all locations
- 10. Daycare

Elementary School Resource and Speech

(Number of parents in group: 6)

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?

1. Special needs really being taken into account by classroom teacher, such as moods and behavior
2. Educating parents regarding process (IEP Flowchart)
3. Support services – responsive to parents
4. Speech at Arroyo Vista - positive experience over 6 years (long term)
5. Classroom teacher and special education teacher communicating needs of student well
6. Classroom teacher more aware of needs of students because of smaller class size
7. Classroom teacher good at implementing accommodations
8. Good collaboration
9. Good communication amongst all special education staff
10. Dr. Dennis Lefevre – great communication and works well with parents and staff

2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

1. **ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) education to teachers on strategies, skills, behavior**
2. **Special Education Handbook – update/reuse for parents (pdf download)**
3. **District should provide parameters for eligibility for special education services and explain the assessment process**
4. **General education teachers need to be more aware of possible problems of students**
5. Medical diagnosis vs educational eligibility (504) - Confusing to parents; Parents getting mixed messages; terms
6. Guidelines & suggestions for parents on who is eligible or not eligible

7. Early screening for at-risk kids
8. Teacher plans for substitute teacher should include names of students with special needs and checklist of how to help them
9. Parents need to know what interventions are in place in general education before special education assessment
10. Knowledge of what programs are available
11. Power difference during IEPs - some parents feel unprepared; felt that advocate was necessary

Elementary School Special Day Class or Inclusion

(Number of parents in group: 3)

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?

1. Good intentions and execution of program by staff.
2. Coordination between general education teacher and resource staff is good for inclusion students, ensuring that pullouts are timed well and are not disruptive
3. Students are making good progress toward their goals
4. The connection between K-2 and 3-5 classes is good, as the classrooms are adjacent. Parents anticipate a smooth transition between classrooms when the time comes.
5. The small K-2 class size is positive for learning; it's good to have the two classes of K-2 and 3-5.

2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

1. **Provide behavioral support person for teachers and students. Transitions (to Kindergarten especially, with a new school campus, classrooms, and expectations) can create anxiety and behavior problems. A behaviorist could regularly observe classrooms and campus and make suggestions, be involved in planning, attend IEPs, etc.**
2. **Improve the depth and frequency of communications from staff to parents. Parents want to know about current curriculum/classroom activities and student progress on a more regular basis than only at IEPs. Focus on creating more informal opportunities for staff-parent communication.**
3. **Make copies of textbooks/work materials available for home use.**
4. Improve transition to Kindergarten. Staff could meet with parents for an orientation before school begins, meet each student, students could have a playdate, Kindergarten SDC teacher should attend all transition IEPs from pre-Kindergarten.
5. Educate parents about pathways to inclusion from SDC; parents want to know how and when mainstreaming will occur.
6. Provide bathroom in K-2 SDC classroom.

Middle School SDC, Inclusion or Transition

(Number of parents in group: 2)

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?

1. Training teachers (some teachers are understanding how to work with students). Parents felt that teachers are FINALLY getting the training they need to deal with special needs kids.
2. Staff is amazing & accommodating. A parent of a child who needs to be taught at home due to illness felt this was true for their situation.
3. IEP Process was welcoming. Parents shared that they no longer felt intimidated during their children's IEPs.
4. Services have improved
5. Student is “happy” with school – Overall, students “loves middle-school”
6. The staff is kind
7. Some teachers respond by email quickly
8. Sixth grade team does a great job of transitioning student from elementary to middle school.

2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

1. **More training for general education teachers. Most parents felt that teachers still don't understand the legalities of what an IEP represents and in some cases are not following the IEP as a legal document**
 - a. **Understanding legalities of the IEP**
 - b. **Training for accommodations and modifications. Parents believe teachers need more training for this part of IEPs**
 - c. **Case carrier should meet with all teachers to review IEPs on the first week of school**
2. **Communication is difficult with some middle-school teachers – some don't check emails**
3. **Communication between RSP case worker and parent. Some parents felt**

that the communication between the RSP case worker and parent needed improvement.

4. Services should not be removed without parents knowing; parents are not being informed when some services are terminated
5. Giving parents copies of the finalized IEP; some parents haven't received their final copies of completed IEPs
6. Following through with good suggestions made at the IEP meeting; IEP is not being followed
7. Communication between teachers and home teacher needs to be improved; a parent of a child who needs to be taught at home due to illness felt this was true for their situation.
8. Written procedures are needed between home teachers and middle school teachers (e.g., when a student needs to be taught at home due to illness).

High School SDC, Inclusion or Transition

(Number of parents in group: 3)

1. What is your school or the District doing well in providing services?

1. Homework support from staff
2. Special education teacher Angelique Burzynski is doing an awesome job
3. Like the animation course - there is more acceptance from general education staff
4. Enthusiastic young staff
5. Student tutoring
6. Programs designed to keep students in their local high school
7. Students feel safe and a part of the school community (happy)!
8. Open to parent input and concerns during IEP
9. Students are encouraged to socialize during uninstruced time
10. Like the entrepreneur class and electives
11. Strategic inclusion

2. What suggestions or ideas do you have for improving services?

1. **Social skills class**
2. **Increase the amount of peer mentoring (Circle of Friends Model)**
3. **Communication should be multi-modal**
4. Communication regarding attendance policy. (Phone calls aren't returned when messages are left)
5. Encourage friendships during lunch, color day, etc.

ATTACHMENT A – 2013 FORUM AGENDA



South Pasadena PTA Council Special Needs Committee

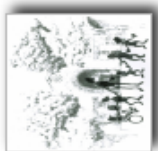
**SPUSD Special Needs Education:
A Forum for Collaboration**

October 17, 2013

AGENDA

Welcome and Introductions (PTA)	7:00 PM
Welcome and Comments (District)	
Review Agenda/Process/Goals/Results	
Review Ground Rules	
Break into groups and assigned tables	7:20
Introductions	7:25
Brainstorm answers to question 1	7:30
Brainstorm issues related to question 2	7:40
Group and clarify issues	8:00
Prioritize issues with dots	8:05
Discuss ideas and solutions for top priority issues	8:25
Resume as one group	8:35
Share one to two ideas from each group (facilitators)	8:40
Comments on the evening	8:55
Meeting ends	9:00 PM
<i>Please remember to turn in your evaluations and questionnaires.</i>	

ATTACHMENT B - 2013 FORUM EVALUATION FORM



South Pasadena PTA Council Special Needs Committee
SPUSD Special Needs Education: A Forum for Collaboration
 October 17, 2013

EVALUATION FORM

Please rate the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
1. I was able to express my comments and suggestions effectively					
2. The goals and agenda were clear to me					
3. The format of the meeting was effective					
4. The facilitator of my group was neutral and kept discussion going					
5. I understand what the follow-up will be					
6. I would recommend this program to others if it were offered again					

Additional Comments/suggestions: _____

Future topics or speakers you would like to hear: _____

I am attending as a: _____ Parent _____ Teacher _____ Other school staff _____ board member _____ Student _____ Other: _____

Please complete the following if you would like to be notified of future PTA Special Needs Committee programs (please print clearly!):

Name _____ E-mail Address _____

Phone Number _____

~ Thank you for your time and comments! ~

You may fax this form to 323-340-1568 or email to [Lourdes Nonato, lnonato@socal.rr.com](mailto:Lourdes.Nonato@socal.rr.com)

ATTACHMENT C – 2007 FORUM SUMMARY

2007 Summary of Comments:

These were some of the common themes among the groups. Many people are seeing improvements in services as listed in the individual sections. But people would like to see improvements in the following areas:

1. Teacher and Staff Training – by providing continuing special needs training for all, in service training on best practices and researched based instruction for general education and special education teachers. Also training on the legalities of the IEP process.
2. Parent Training – to understand district structure and limitations, pertinent legislative issues, sharing of new methodologies by parents and teachers in committees, online resources for newsletters, bibliography of articles and books of interest, a library for special ed resources.
3. Anti – Bullying programs implemented and also friendship clubs set up for peer support.
4. Increase support for General Education teachers working with special needs students – by implementing best practices, research based instruction and assistive technology.
5. Communication – improve by providing quicker responses for questions that need to be addressed immediately, better use of daily reports, email and websites.

2007 Recommendations for the District:

Our committee has the following suggestions for the board, the district and the Special Needs committee to work together on to address this report to the community.

1. The District should set up a district wide Special Needs Task Force to help the district evaluate and implement this report. This Task Force should be mandated by the District so that it operates from top down and involves all stakeholders.
2. Support the committee in providing parent education programs on special needs.

ATTACHMENT D – 2009 FORUM SUMMARY

2009 Summary of Comments:

These were some of the common themes among the groups. People would like to see improvements in the following areas:

- 1. Updated Special Needs Services and Programs.** Many parents feel that the district needs new cutting edge Specials Needs services and programs
- 2. More General Education Teacher and Staff Training.** There was a consensus that the Special Education staff is well-trained but the general education teachers and classified staff need more training on working with Special Needs students.
- 3. Better Transition Supports.** Parents feel there is a lack of good high school transition plans, successful transitions between grade levels, and life skills trainings specific to Special Needs students.
- 4. Improve IEP Preparation.** Parents felt that the preparation by staff for IEP meetings needs to be greatly improved.

2009 Recommendations for the District:

Our committee has the following specific suggestions for the board and the district.

1. With the large increase in diagnoses of Special Needs students, there has also been a large increase in the development of special services and program directed for this population. The district should be proactive in identifying and utilizing new programs and services that focus on their strengths, i.e., technology, software, social skills groupings.
2. The district should work on better ways to train and work with general education teachers and staff in implementing a student's IEP and modifying curriculum and homework in the general education setting.
3. The district should provide specific training on high school transition plans for all involved. This will enable Special Needs students can transition out of high school with higher success rate. The district should also provide more directed programs to transition Special Needs students from the elementary to middle school level and from the middle school to high school level. The district should develop more directed life skills programs at all levels for Special Needs students.
4. The district should develop standard procedures and deadlines for providing IEP documents, reports, and test results to parents in a timely manner prior to an IEP meeting.

ATTACHMENT E – 2011 FORUM SUMMARY

2011 Summary of Comments:

Before getting into the comments, the Committee is pleased to report that the comments collected in this Forum were generally much more positive than in the past two Forums, which shows the District and staff have improved how they serve our special needs students and families. Comments about good special education staff came up more often than in the past. Furthermore, it appears that preparation by staff for Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings has improved and that IEPs are being followed better than in the past.

Comments from each of the seven individual breakout groups start on page 5 of this report. The Committee synthesized the following five trends from the comments:

- 1. Communication:** Many parents expressed feeling “out of the loop” or unaware of District programs or possible changes to service delivery. This is a particularly pressing concern for parents/guardians whose students are placed outside of our District in non-public schools, in County schools or in SELPA programs. Note that this has been an ongoing issue since our first Forum in 2007.
- 2. Evaluation and Access to Services:** Another recurring theme is that parents/guardians do not have a clear understanding of the process for evaluating and identifying students for special education services. Many felt the District was placing “roadblocks” in the way of getting students evaluated and/or starting special education services.
- 3. Academic Assessment:** There were several comments suggesting alternative and/or supplemental assessment methods, beyond California standardized testing, for students receiving special education services. Many of the comments noted the need for more frequent reports (i.e., more frequent than the annual IEP meeting or the regular report cards).
- 4. Training for General Education Staff:** While Forum attendees generally had positive reports on the District’s special education staff, attendees expressed a continued need for training of the general education staff in the needs and processes of special education.
- 5. Consultation with Parents before Service Changes.** Although this issue did not arise across all school sites, this topic dominated discussion of the elementary school Special Day Class (SDC) program. At the time of the Forum, the SDC at Monterey Hills served special needs students from all grades (K-5) in one classroom. This range of ages and abilities led to parental concerns regarding the District’s ability to provide an appropriate education to all students in this setting. Since the Forum, the situation has been resolved and two SDCs have been established. However, this case raised the ongoing importance of prior consultation with parents as IEP team members when the District contemplates changes that affect services agreed to in IEPs.

2011 Recommendations for the District:

Our committee suggests that the Board and the District:

1. Consider authoring and implementing a Special Education Communication Plan to ensure that information is being effectively transmitted to all stakeholders within the special education community.
2. Prepare a simple and straightforward Special Education Evaluation and Process Guide that is provided to parents and guardians inquiring about special needs evaluation/assessment/process. The Guide should contain graphic flowcharts and timelines for ease of understanding. Additionally, principals and general education staff should be briefed on the Guide and the Guide should be available across multiple websites.
3. Consider working with the PTA or SPEF to create an “Ombudsman” position to provide a “friendly face” and help facilitate understanding of Special Education processes.
4. Consult with parent IEP team members when the District is contemplating broad changes that may affect its ability to provide the services agreed to in students’ IEPs, such as reductions in the number of classrooms or staff positions.
5. Require each school site to have a Special Education Committee or Representative as a means to promote better communication and understanding.
6. Consider forming a “Special Education Assessment Working Group” under the umbrella of this committee. The working group should consist of administrators, teachers, and parents. The working group would 1) review how the District analyzes and uses state testing results for the Special Education subgroup to improve performance, 2) review other means of assessment used by the district, 3) identify potential shortcomings, 4) recommend improvements, and 5) report findings.
7. Continue to support continuing education and training for parents, administrative staff, special education educators, and general education staff. This Committee intends to hold its second special education conference in 2013.

Results from Previous Forums

Results from previous Forums have influenced some of the following positive improvements:

- A special education conference in 2011
- Staff and parent training / continuing education
- District retention of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and Occupational Therapist
- Development of an SDC preschool class
- Development of assistive technology programs, particularly focused upon use of iPads in the classroom.