
SPUSD SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION: A FORUM FOR COLLABORATION

South Pasadena PTA Council Special Needs Committee Report Parent Input from the October 20, 2011 program, SPUSD Special Needs Education: A Forum for Collaboration

February 22, 2012

Introduction: On October 20, 2011, the South Pasadena PTA Council Special Needs Committee (the Committee), in partnership with SPUSD (the District), held the titled program to solicit parent feedback about the special education services provided by the District. This is the third time this Forum has been held; previous Forums were held in 2007 and 2009.

To publicize the event a flyer went out in all registration packets prior to school opening. Flyers about the event were then sent home via backpack mail after school started, and the District sent flyers by direct mail to middle school, high school, Los Angeles County school, non-public school, and Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) school families. It was also publicized in all PTA newsletters in the months of September and October, the *South Pasadena Review*, various social media forums and the Committee's website at www.spp4snc.com. A member of the Committee spoke at all South Pasadena school staff meetings to encourage the staff to participate and encourage communication about this Forum with their students' families. Additionally, where possible, Committee members spoke or hosted tables at back-to-school nights at the five South Pasadena school sites.

The Forum was held in the SPUSD boardroom. Over 50 parents were in attendance. District staff and School Board members were also in attendance to hear the comments from the parents. All five principals attended.

The goal of the Forum was to record input from interested parents or guardians of children with special needs, and then to pass the input to the School Board, District staff and to the PTA Council Special Needs Committee for review. All groups can then use this input to work together to take action to improve our District's services and ways of working with special needs students 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 Laura Kieffer, Chair of the South Pasadena PTA Council Special Needs Committee, Joel Shapiro, SPUSD Superintendent, and Kendra Rose, Director of Special Education, SPUSD.

We then broke the attendees into seven breakout groups and assigned each group a trained facilitator and recorder. Staff and 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?

There was time given for brainstorming and to group individual answers and prioritize them with stickers. Comments that could be prioritized are listed in order of priority in bold type under the questions. As a wrap-up, the groups came together and facilitators summarized comments from each of the groups. The agenda for the Forum is included as Attachment A.

Summary of Comments:

Before getting into the comments, the Committee is pleased to report that 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.

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.

Previous Forums

This is the third Forum hosted by the Committee, with previous efforts held in 2007 (over 50 attendees) and 2009 (over 30 attendees). For reference, the previous summary of comments and corresponding suggestions are included as Attachment B and C. 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 Analysis and Occupational Therapist
- Development of an SDC preschool class
- Development of assistive technology programs, particularly focused upon use of iPads in the classroom.

A detailed report by Director of Special Education Kendra Rose is attached as Attachment D. Many of these programs have saved the District funds by allowing us to become a service provider as opposed to outsourcing services. Additionally, many of the benefits spread to the general education population.

Infant and Preschool Special Day Class

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

1. Good relationship between SDC teacher and Special Ed Support Staff
2. Interaction and mainstream opportunities (Friday Fun)
3. Children are interacting more in speech
4. Great new teacher, calm, fresh new ideas
5. Message from teacher reminding kids that their parents love them.
6. Feels like a preschool
7. Lots of books/library visits

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

1. Restroom in the classroom
2. More resources – through grants, fundraising events
3. Keep small class size – split class into morning and afternoon sessions
4. Keep kids in the community for services with trained staff and 1 on 1 aides
5. Access to enrichment opportunities (SPEF, music, lunch, dance)
6. Play dates
7. New opportunities – field trips
8. A gym
9. List of books/DVDs that parents can find in the library
10. Retain staff
11. Embrace inclusion and our special needs kids
12. Provide more recommendations and accommodations

Elementary School Resource and Speech

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

1. Second Step Program/Bullying Prevention
2. Good team approach
3. Collaboration between gen ed teacher and special ed teachers
4. Summer school proficiency classes
5. Feeling comfortable with team support
6. Following of IEP
7. Responsive
8. Progress toward goals

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

Communication

1. Educating general ed teachers on the process for identification and qualification
2. Open and honest communication
3. Get rid of roadblocks to assessing children
4. Communicate to parents and teachers SELPA-wide resources
5. Improve assistive technology
6. Ensure parents receive progress reports mentioned in IEP

System Process

1. Early identification/helping parents get into the system.
2. Telling parents how to access the system.
3. Perhaps post on SPUSD website. Posting process on website or elsewhere.

Help/support for students who don't qualify for Special Ed

After School Program

Communication and System process

1. Telling parents how to access the special ed system by posting protocol on website
2. Educating parents and general ed teachers about the process of identification and qualification
3. Open and honest communication/remove roadblocks
4. Make SELPA-wide resources known to parents and teachers

Assistive Technology

1. Funding \$\$
2. Donations from private sources
3. Grants
4. Fund Raising

Elementary School SDC or Inclusion

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

1. The Staff at MHS is qualified and caring.
2. The staff at MHS tries hard to work with all students.
3. The staff at MHS put in much effort to come together to support new combined SDC class (K – 5th grade class for 2011-2012).
4. MHS is doing a good job of supporting general education student with his IEP.
5. Last year (2010-2011), reverse mainstreaming worked well with upper grade SDC class.
6. Last year (2010-2011), the movement/mainstreaming between the SDC class and Mrs. Tull's 4th/5th grade class was fluid and seamless.

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

1. Separate the SDC class into two classes at MHS (for example, a K – 2nd grade and a 3rd – 5th grade class). Range of ages and abilities of students in MHS SDC is too broad and Academic and behavior needs of individual students are not being met
2. Improve student safety by placing younger students in a separate classroom.
3. Ensure that all staff is trained in CPI (Crisis Prevention Institute), including certificated, administrative staff and classified staff.
4. Improve communication between district/sites and special education parents. If possible, send weekly updates regarding SDC classes.
5. Implement appropriate mainstreaming of SDC students into general education classrooms (i.e., mainstreaming should not be implemented merely to reduce the number of special education students in the SDC classroom)
6. Secure consent from parents regarding major changes to SDC program
7. Allow parents and professionals to visit and observe the SDC classroom, according to school protocol (call principal in advance to schedule visitation)
8. Improve individual academic instruction by changing the setting (present SDC classroom setting at MHS is disruptive)
9. Include additional assessment (in addition to state testing) during the school year to give parents a better idea of what has been learned (include assessment for kindergarteners and first graders).

Middle School Resource and Speech

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

1. Meeting student's needs appropriately.
2. Supportive
3. Improved coordination of services
4. Consider and meet needs of the "whole" child.
5. Staff has personal connection to students. Really get to know the students as individuals.

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

1. Person to assist with clear understanding of the process, particularly at the beginning of IEP services. Hire ombudsman, neutral party.
2. Training for general education teachers. Provide more training.
3. Lack of vision of special education program at district level. Philosophy and direction. Set goals in vision sessions to identify best practices.
4. Inclusion beyond school day, extracurricular
5. Need more vocational/functional skills training.
6. Monitoring qualitative of effectiveness of special education programs district wide.
7. Easier process to gen an evaluation and get services started. Identification process
8. Consistency of district staff, lack of reporting/communicating from admin to special ed to general staff and vice versa, informing student has IEP – including content.
9. Too much paperwork
10. Who is looking at the "whole" child and their comprehensive program?
Integrative approach.
11. Being more proactive.

Middle School SDC, Inclusion or Transition

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

1. Class volume/structure/size
2. Administrative has been responsive to needs.
3. Good communication.
4. Good staff/parent collaboration.

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

1. CIRCLE OF FRIENDS, provides typical modeling for special needs students, education for typical student population, social skills for all, and friendships.
2. Special Needs Assembly, covering topics like describing disabilities and treating people with respect and understanding
3. More Elective Selections, with parents and/or interns teaching
4. Alternative assessments for student progress.

High School Resource and Speech

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

1. Smooth support into high school and transition from other school districts.
2. Good self esteem, no stigma at high school.
3. Teachers keep students on task and teach self-advocacy.
4. Willingness to make programs and alternatives work.
5. Continuum of programs.
6. The learning lab is good.
7. Special Education assistance, including IEP, created immediate calming effect.
8. College preparation.

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

1. Continue to provide general education teachers in service training on the needs and processes of special education (especially new teachers).
2. Know class schedules earlier.
3. Do college fair/e-mail college special education program information for special education students and parents.
4. More organizational and time management skills training.
5. Gap with summer programs/explore outside summer school options.
6. Better communication with parents at non-South Pasadena placements. (Include in SPUSD e-mail addresses)
7. Clear up learning lab use with new/regular ed teachers. Also have daily, not every other day, and during the summer.
8. Have outside (other placement) options during regular school year too.
9. Review outside credit courses.

High School SDC, Inclusion or Transition

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

1. Special Education conference in the spring was very informative. Would like to see as a full day.
2. Excellent Staff/SDC – they provide good explanation, creative solutions and are accommodating.
3. Good Communication and timely responses
4. Last Year's Department Head is an excellent teacher, a role model for every teacher and is highly qualified, friendly and caring.

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

1. Demerits to grades must be in line with the IEP- General Education teachers must back up grades with explanations.
2. SDC students need higher level classes. Can make computerized single subject modules available to SDC students to self pace their learning in classes such as: Biology, Geometry and other classes that are not available in SDC classes.
3. Self Advocacy and Social Skills continuous trainings for all SDC students
4. Behavior Specialist at every campus – Since all Special needs students deal with behaviors their needs need to be met. (Similar to counselors being available to Gen Ed Students)
5. More professional Development on Special Education for General Education Teachers
6. College track classes at appropriate level for SDC students
7. Higher expectations for SDC students
8. Clarifications of standards need to be explained by teacher to students.
9. Teachers need to read IEP and understand the meaning.
10. Be open to making changes (including grades)
11. Continue Special Needs conferences for parents/community make full day.

ATTACHMENT A – 2011 FORUM AGENDA

South Pasadena Council of PTAs Special Needs Committee
SPUSD Special Needs Education: A Forum for Collaboration

Agenda

Welcome and Introductions (PTA)		7:00
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
Please remember to turn in your evaluations and questionnaires.		

ATTACHMENT B – 2007 FORUM SUMMARY

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.

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 C – 2009 FORUM SUMMARY

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.

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 D – DISTRICT ACTIONS TO ADDRESS COMMENTS FROM
PRIOR FORUMS

South Pasadena Unified School District
Pupil Services and Special Education Department
By Kendra Rose, Director

The Special Education Department of South Pasadena Unified School District is very appreciative of the input and feedback that it has received from parents attending the previous forums. Listed below are some of the programs and services that have been initiated and implemented due to those comments and suggestions.

With the support of the Curriculum and Instruction Office, there have been more training for all special and general education teachers as well as classified staff members. These trainings for all K-12 staff have included workshops presented by Rick Clemens addressing the inclusion of students in the general education classrooms. The information from these workshops was further discussed in smaller groups of staff members who looked at the next steps of implementation. There have also been trainings and discussions related to differentiating instruction and interventions that would help all students access and progress in the curriculum. There have also been specific workshops for the instructional aides on specific topics such as ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis), how to take and record data, how to support students in both the general and special education settings, etc. Training for aides continues on a one to one basis with them. The Department/District has also supported teachers and aides with outside consultants to address topics of developing social skills and behavioral skills with special needs students. Some of these consultants have been Board Certified Behavior Analysts. There have been additional trainings provided by the SELPA and also regular monthly meetings at each school to discuss topics specific to their site.

There have also been training for parents on a monthly basis through meetings with the Director of Special Education. At these meetings we discuss legislative changes, descriptions of programs and services, interventions, ESY, and other topics that the parents want to discuss.

Additionally to support students accessing and progressing in the curriculum, there has been a lot of training and follow up for teachers to use Thinking Maps in the lessons in their classrooms. Again from feedback from parents, the District has also provided training for all staff regarding bullying, both preventative measures as well as what to do when it does occur. Subsequently, there is a greater understanding and recognition when bullying occurs and then implementing steps to address this issue on our campuses.

Thanks to input from the forums and to address the needs of students, the District has also hired a BCBA as their own employee. This employee is observing students in the general education program, consulting with teachers, and other special education staff. This employee may also be consulting with parents. Additionally, the district has been fortunate to be able to hire a Program Specialist to support the special education program.

She has been reviewing IEPs and given feedback to staff to insure compliance. She has also been in classrooms to consult with teachers to support students with special needs.

Also the District has hired their own Occupational Therapist, who not only provides direct services to students, but also continually consults with all staff who are providing other services to the student. This has been very beneficial because the O.T. is regularly in the classroom or on the playground with students, so she understands the curriculum that the students are trying to access so that she can develop her sessions to relate specifically to the curriculum. Teachers see the O.T. regularly on their own campuses and know that she is available to them.

Another new development since the forums began is the implementation of our own district Special Day Class for preschool students. This also has been very beneficial to have our own South Pasadena students start their education in their home district where their families live.

A lot of work has also been done in the area of assistive technology. The District has purchased iPads for some students in the classroom and teachers are using more technology in their classrooms. We are evaluating different applications to use with students to help them with their learning goals. We also have special education staff that are being trained at the Diagnostic Center in the area of assistive technology.