

Dear Superintendent McGee and PAUSD School Board Members,

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to the preliminary findings from the Harvard Review of Special Education. The Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee for Special Education (“Palo Alto CAC”) is committed to facilitating parent engagement and advising the district on issues of importance to families of students with special education needs. The Harvard Review is an important first step in building PAUSD’s capacity to transparently plan, develop, implement and manage its special education program. The initial findings suggest that PAUSD would benefit from looking closely at its “front door” to services for students with disabilities to make sure that students are identified early and appropriately. In addition, PAUSD has already committed to explicitly addressing equity, and the data compiled by the Harvard team demonstrates the importance of considering equity issues related to students with disabilities. Finally, working with families is essential for positive student outcomes. The Harvard Review underscores the need for PAUSD to commit to actionable steps that eliminate mistrust and improves collaboration with families of students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities need appropriate instruction and evidence based support to ensure maximum success in post-secondary education and employment. Well-timed and well-executed, early intervention improves longer-term outcomes. We believe that teachers want the students they teach to succeed. The recommendation for embedded teacher support is critical to the success of students and teachers. Teachers can better meet the needs of students with disabilities when the District ensures that professionals with expertise in evidence based approaches are available to support teachers in their classes. This support allows students to be educated in the most inclusive setting possible.

A specific concern, for example, is the challenge for educators to meet Common Core State standards when students have specific cognitive disabilities such as autism. There are evidence based approaches to support students with autism. With training and support by other professionals with expertise in working with students with autism, such as Board Certified Behavioral Analysts, teachers will be better able to plan and implement programs of instruction aimed to enable students with autism to make meaningful progress.

Healthy family and student engagement is essential to success for all students, but especially for students with disabilities. Clear and specific guidelines for teacher-parent-school collaboration, and student involvement in their own progress and planning is critical for satisfaction and success. We support and can assist the district in its efforts to inform and empower families and teachers about the special education process and its response to intervention practices. Special education includes prescribed processes and practices. The procedural processes required by law build trust when implemented in good faith. Individuals need not be the gatekeepers, but solution-finders for our students, teachers and parents.

The Palo Alto CAC endorses the recommendations set forth in these preliminary findings. They align with the 2015 CA Statewide Task Force on Special Education and we encourage you to read the attached Executive Summary as you will find it remarkably consistent. Likewise, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has "revised its accountability system to shift the balance from a system focused primarily on compliance to one that puts more emphasis on results."

The completion of the Harvard Review has already been delayed. We request that the community be informed of a revised timetable and related actions so we can move along to timely implementation.

Respectfully,

Kimberly Eng Lee and Christina Schmidt

On behalf of the Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee for Special Education

cc: Holly Wade, Ph.D., Chief Student Services Officer
Chiara W. Perry, Ed. S, Director, Special Education

Attached: Report of California's Statewide Task Force on Special Education, March 2015.