



December 7, 2016

To: Members of the PAUSD School Board and Superintendent McGee

The Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee (“CAC”) strives to work cooperatively with PAUSD to help shape priorities in Special Education to ensure students with disabilities have equal access to quality public education. We are pleased that this Review by Hehir and Associates affirms the issues and concerns we articulated previously, and that through their surveys, teachers and administrators are also confirming much of the same. PAUSD has made strides to include students with disabilities in General Education (“GenEd”) classrooms, however, that alone is not sufficient to ensure access to the supports and specialized instruction students with disabilities need for effective learning.

The Report points to a lack of information for measuring Special Education program effectiveness, and insufficient classroom supports and evidence-based practices to effectively teach students with disabilities. Efforts underway to produce a PAUSD SpEd handbook for parents and teachers are a good first step to foster communication. This must be followed with consistent delivery of tangible results and improvement for students. We agree with the findings and as a next step, expect district level leadership to develop clear goals, plans, and aligned systems for Special Education (“SpEd”). **Accordingly, we recommend that district leadership act upon three directives.** These correspond with findings in this Review and parent input we provided to Dr. Hehir a year ago (see Addendum).

1. **Focus on student outcomes and deliver measurable results** (Recommendation #1)
 - Articulate SpEd Goals and be accountable for improved outcomes for students with disabilities. (finding #8)
 - Be proactive and preventative providing supports and accommodations to make measurable and meaningful progress on academic and behavioral goals for students with disabilities. SpEd is not a catch-all program for under-resourced, struggling or behaviorally challenged students. We concur with that “PAUSD is still employing a wait to fail model”. In fact, many students with specific mild to moderate learning differences are likely to have been overlooked or underserved because they are not in “really bad shape”. (finding #6)
 - Identify students with disabilities properly and early (A.K.A. “Child Find”). We concur that there are inconsistencies. Administrators have concerns that students who “lack advocates, supportive families, and have needs but do not have a diagnosed disorder or structured intervention plan are left behind”. Parents “ask for support repeatedly...

which suggests that [those] with less ability or inclination to advocate...may be ignored". (finding #7)

- Produce metrics and share information that is instructionally useful. The Review finds the district lacks metrics to improve practices and monitor student progress. Assessment and evaluation metrics, like a universal screener, must be identified, so tracking and reporting of existing practices and progress can begin with regularity to parents, schools, the Superintendent, and the Board. (finding #9)

2. Increase the use of evidenced-based, disability-specific strategies (Recommendation #4 and Finding #5)

- We should be proactively employing RTI strategies, as well as evidence-based strategies to teach specific skills deficits. PAUSD needs to take stock of the resources and expertise available to meet the needs of all students with disabilities, especially taking into consideration the availability across grades and schools of supports commonly required to meet the needs of students with high-incidence disabilities such as dyslexia, autism and ADHD.
- SpEd is associated with academic failure, but does not need to be. "Children need specialized intervention from trained teachers as early as possible to get them on the right track for learning" (p. 28). And by changing the prevailing attitude, we reduce stigma and promote social and emotional wellness.
- This Review does not identify the evidence-based programs and practices that PAUSD does and should employ. The CAC believes that this program-level detail is critical.

3. Increase collaboration between General Ed and Special Ed (Recommendation #5 and Finding #3)

- Teachers and administrators need additional supports and specific techniques to effectively include and teach students with learning differences and disabilities. This underscores how important it is to encourage and foster partnerships with psychologists, behaviorists, case managers and other SpEd specialists.
- GenEd teachers requested coaching to increase their knowledge of effective supports and specific techniques and opportunities to leverage skills and knowledge between professionals. (finding #3)
 - 62% of teachers surveyed want support around students below grade level, both ELL and SpEd; Specific examples and interventions, not theories. Teachers want more time for consultation and collaboration with peers. (p.12)
 - 75% of administrators surveyed want more support around differentiated learning and strategies for struggling students, and those with behavioral and social emotional challenges. (p.10)
- Maintain high, consistent standards and practices for all students. PAUSD needs to better understand how unconscious bias of a student's ability/potential might be based upon disability, race or socio-economic status and develop clear goals to interrupt unconscious bias (including bias related to disability). In addition, PAUSD needs to clarify the intention and outcome of curriculum modifications and laning. (recommendation #2 and finding #4)

- Intervene with struggling students by providing intensive remediation and/or accommodations and access, prior to or in tandem with targeted SpEd services. (finding #6)

There is clearly districtwide interest in improving student outcomes in the classroom and across our schools, presuming we know the baseline. The CAC agrees that UDL “embeds challenge and support into the classroom” by design, but it’s success depends on the support and leadership of general educators and school principals. As such, it is not a feasible near-term approach. The CAC anticipates that a comprehensive plan is needed to understand the District’s current capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

This Review informs the work that lies ahead and requires that district leadership develop a clear vision and expectations for (1) efficient and aligned data and information systems to support good instructional decision making, measurable results and greater consistency across schools, (2) a plan for training and collaborating within GenEd classes, and (3) ongoing application of evidence-based programs for specific disabilities. We reiterate our offer from June of 2015 to participate in a local task force to study PAUSD Special Education and help establish a rigorous accountability plan. And we strongly encourage the Board to amend it’s strategic plan to effectively address these needs in Special Education as recommended.

Respectfully,

Kimberly Eng Lee and Christina Schmidt

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

Cc: Holly Wade, Chiara Perry, Marcus Autrey, Sharon Ofek, Barbara Harris, Judy Argumedo, Brenda Carrillo, Lissette Moore-Guerra, Martha Castellon

Addendums:

Letter from CAC to Dr. Hehir, dated October 2015

Letter from CAC to Board of Education, dated June 2015