



The Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee (CAC) for Special Education,  
a district subcommittee of SELPA 1, Santa Clara County, California

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“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

~ Paulo Freire ~

Dear Dr. Hehir,

The Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee (CAC) for Special Education welcomes you to our school district. We serve families with children with disabilities in PAUSD. Our goal is to support families and students and to advocate for systemic reforms that will improve both the everyday experiences of students with disabilities and their long-term outcomes. Your work aligns nicely with our mission and we are looking forward to learning from you about how to greater support students with disabilities in our schools.

In preparation for your visit, we have looked back at group minutes and have asked parents to provide us with feedback about their experiences with PAUSD special education programming. Our aim is to flag for you issues that we hope you will look at closely as you begin your work here. We have tried to highlight areas of strength as well as spotlight parent concerns. In looking at your review in Massachusetts, we are most interested in your approach to trying to understand subcategories of students and how they are faring: by race, income, and eligibility category. We hope that this type of fine-tuned analysis will allow PAUSD to identify where additional expertise related to specific disabilities and evidence-based program options might help us improve our ability to support students.

What follows is a summary of the feedback we have received from parents, which fall into 6 broad themes: Transparency & Communication; Difficulty Accessing Services; Staffing; Training, Inclusion and Unconscious Bias; Evidenced-Based Programs Based on Disability; and Social & Emotional Wellness.

## **1. Transparency & Communication**

Many parents report positive relationships with their IEP team, which is beneficial to all. However, some parents feel their teams are adversarial, rather than engaging and collaborating with them. Parents should be recognized as allies in developing appropriate programs for their children; we are concerned when this does not happen.

Many parents have said that they find it difficult to navigate the special education system, and wish that more helpful information was provided to them. For example, they often feel they do not have access to information about all available programs, what is available at different schools, what they need to know at different transition points, etc.

Finally, when staffing changes occur, parents often feel they were not given adequate notice, or that a change in staff was not adequately transitioned so that the child has the least disruption and most ability to acclimate to the new staff person.

The CAC has also had a difficult time obtaining basic District level information about special education outcomes, programs, and protocols.

## **2. Difficulty Accessing Services**

Following on the theme of having difficulty navigating the special education system, parents are often bewildered to discover that PAUSD will find their children ineligible for an IEP, even in cases where an outside evaluation/diagnosis has been made.

Once a child has an IEP, that is no guarantee that they will receive services. Parents are frustrated and often mention the slowness of staff to identify problems, find an appropriate response, or implement the services set forth in the IEP. Parents of children with medical needs or other health impairment often are frustrated by staff that seems unprepared to support their child.

Another example of accessing services is in after school and extracurricular activities, where children with disabilities are often not well represented. PAUSD could improve on its efforts to support students with disabilities so they can participate in extracurricular and afterschool activities available to other students. Extracurricular inclusion and services should be part of the IEP planning process. Staff need to learn how important these opportunities are to ensure meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities in our school community.

## **3. Staffing**

Quality staff (appropriately trained, inspired, passionate, engaged with parents and committed to ongoing professional development) is the key to success. Parents report that a skilled, caring teacher or other staff member has made the most positive impact on their child's success, academically or socially/emotionally.

Many parents raise concerns about the need for high-quality instruction for children in special education. Many children with greater needs are spending a lot of time with aides, and sometimes are being taught by aides who lack suitable skills or competence in special education. Parents point to the need for more teaching by qualified special education teachers, citing that special education teachers are spread too thin and are not directly supervising the aides due to administrative tasks or absence from class.

In addition, special education teachers may not have the specialized training in evidence-based curriculum or methodology that is most appropriate to meet the needs of specific students. We are hoping that you have ideas about how to help the District improve its ability to make sure that students are taught by staff that is able to address their specific needs. Teachers would benefit from easy access to experts with knowledge about specific disabilities and evidence-based interventions based on the disabilities of students in their classes. Staff need to have expertise in evidence-based curriculum and methods in order to be most effective.

#### **4. Training, Inclusion and Unconscious Bias**

Generally, parents are pleased that PAUSD is a champion of inclusion and recognize that the district has made great strides in setting policy, supporting awareness campaigns and establishing practices that recognize and deal with bullying behaviors. Many parents report success in inclusion of their children in mainstream classrooms, receiving special education support without being segregated from typical peers.

Parents identify team-teaching and co-teaching, which PAUSD teachers have been trained on in the last few years, as successful models, but are concerned that this may not occur enough. Excellent specialist staff (for example, a good SLP) can make a huge impact facilitating inclusion on a campus. The staff at many of our schools, however, do not seem to have been trained well on inclusion, or they are spread too thin with too many cases to provide effective support. And some staff, unfortunately, may have unconscious biases towards students with special needs.

In this high-achieving and competitive district, our parents (and our kids) often feel that they are looked on as 'less than' by their peers because of their disabilities. Children may feel socially excluded by other students (and, unfortunately, their families), and need support from all school staff to be included in the larger school community. This unconscious bias is an underlying attitude that gives way to labeling which sets in motion a way of thinking and approaching specific problems faced by students with disabilities and their families.

Unconscious bias is also demonstrated by school staff. Parents and children state that they have heard administrators and staff speak about students as a "bad child", "too difficult", "disruptive and will distract from other students learning in class" and parents are met with the hurtful attitude that they are "annoying, or angry parents that expect too much". CAC is concerned that some current District messaging (e.g. urging parents to focus on learning and not on grades) can easily slip into justification for allowing low expectations to fester for students with disabilities. Parents see this bias demonstrated in the low expectations that are sometimes given to our children by teachers. For marginalized students, it is critical for the District to convey its commitment to high quality educational service delivery.

Furthermore, parents note an inconsistency in mainstream teacher buy-in and orientation toward inclusion, and related training. And all staff need to be trained on how to overcome their unconscious biases so that they can effectively deliver services to our students.

In reviewing the inclusion issues at PAUSD, we hope that you will look specifically at students who are too often overlooked, those in non-public schools and those in our alternative schools. We are concerned that these children are in some of the most segregated environments and often end up in such environments as a result of unmet educational needs.

## **5. Evidence-based programs based on disability**

To truly achieve its mission and vision, PAUSD must expect programs and services it funds to be able to demonstrate through data that they are achieving positive results and “doing no harm” to the recipients.

The growing body of research in educational pedagogy and social and behavioral sciences has demonstrated that certain approaches and strategies designed for working with students with disabilities and their families can positively impact academic performance and address social-emotional problems. These effective approaches and strategies must be packaged into programs targeting outcomes specific to students with learning disabilities, their schools, families, and communities.

We expect that effective program design and operation reflect clear priorities and goals for our students at risk. What we seek are specific science-based interventions and practices that articulate the type of services, supports and activities they offer.

Effective programs that are already in place, and lauded by parents, include the Academic Communication program in our middle schools and the ‘Social Thinking’ curriculum used throughout our schools.

We often hear the most stories of frustration from families with children with certain disabling conditions, for example, ASD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Parent concerns point to a lack of robust early intervention targeted to specific disabilities, too often taking a wait and see attitude before providing the level of remediation that would make a difference early. Every doctor and news report says that early intervention is key, yet it can take years of demonstrated failure before PAUSD will act to address root causes of learning differences with evidence-based programs. It often feels to parents that PAUSD may be predetermining supports based on the district’s available existing programs rather than instituting new programs that will serve individual students based on needs. Specific concerns we hear often are:

### Supports for Students with ASD

- Need better teaching of social skills & active promotion of social inclusion on campuses.
- Need to improve access to BCBA expertise to inform FBA/BIP and direct skill instruction

### Supports and Early Assessments for students with learning disabilities (reading/writing/dyslexia)

- Early assessment of learning disabilities associated with reading and writing are often denied (specific testing for dyslexia)
- Children are not taught sufficiently with evidence-based programs to allow for early remediation and sustained progress.

## **6. Social & Emotional Wellness**

Students with learning differences or disabilities are more at risk for anxiety, depression, and suicide, yet parents feel that planning for students with disabilities is not well integrated into PAUSD initiatives to improve mental health supports for all students.

Students with disabilities are victims of bullying, and may also end up being identified as bullies based on behaviors that relate to their disabilities. Continued refinement of the PAUSD response to bullying is important to ensure that students with disabilities are not stigmatized and bullied

and to ensure that students with disabilities have the social-emotional skills to relate to other students appropriately.

Thank you for taking the time to read our concerns and to consider them in your review. We look forward to meeting you and hopefully assisting you in gathering further information.

Best regards,

Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee for Special Education (SELPA 1 CAC)

cc: Dr. Glenn "Max" McGee, Superintendent  
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