



May 5, 2017

Dear Dr. McGee and PAUSD School Board Members,

The Palo Alto CAC has prepared this letter describing the attributes and qualities we hope to see in the district's next Special Education Director. The future vision and governance of the Department rests squarely on this individual.

We believe the primary goal for Special Education is the provision of targeted, specialized instruction and support to students in areas of deficiency or need, in order to develop their academic and social self-sufficiency. Ultimately it is measurable student progress which fuels the confidence and satisfaction of parents and teachers in our District. The next Special Education Director must ensure that PAUSD's practices are not only fully compliant with the law, but actually effective for improving achievement and well-being.

70% of PAUSD students with IEPs and 504s are now in mainstream classrooms. But the current model needs improvement. Inclusion is a commitment to educating each "person" to the maximum extent appropriate, rather than simply forcing them into a "place". It involves bringing needed supports to the child. Administrators, teachers, staff, and parents when surveyed, were committed to improving systems to support students with disabilities and their families. An effective Director will leverage these experiences, skills and perspectives.

Demonstrates Leadership

- Our next Director must be able to develop a clear vision to focus all the stakeholders. They must have leadership qualities that inspire general and special education staff, fellow administrators, and parents to engage in constructive dialogue and activity which drive towards that vision. The Director's vision must have at its heart, a commitment to success for students with disabilities
- We need a Director with unwavering integrity, accountability and character to deliver on their promises and commitments. This is key to restoring trust between parents and the District.
- Good leaders are strong communicators. They are proactive, responsive, transparent, and will accept and seek out input and constructive criticism in an effort to bring about continuous improvement or to challenge the status quo.

Expertise in Management and Corporate Compliance

- Families and staff do not always agree upon placement, assessments, interventions, goals and services. Our next Director must have strong management skills. They need experience in addressing multiple priorities and conflicting interests, and be committed to finding creative solutions to difficult problems. With resource-constrained dollars, staffing,

and time, an effective Director must be able to develop, equip and empower its educators and advocate with decision makers for necessary resources to support students with disabilities.

- PAUSD's history of OCRs and UCPs necessitates that our next Director have specific knowledge and experience with corporate compliance and educational law, especially special education law. Our new Director must be adept at achieving legal compliance without disregarding student outcomes. While commitment to compliance with the law is essential, it is not sufficient. We cannot leave the education of our children to attorneys. The Special Education Director should possess an attitude of learning from conflict, and willingness to routinely and actively engage in assessing system strengths and weakness to seek opportunities for improvement, regardless of whether such improvements are legally required.

Values Students as Learners and Community Members

- Our Director must value all students as learners, including those with hidden differences, behavioral or developmental challenges. They must be dedicated to employing evidence-based practices to teach and support, and establish a culture that employs innovative approaches when needed, to differentiate instruction so students make social, emotional and academic strides.
- A demonstrated history of championing inclusion of students with special needs in programs across all schools, ensuring physically and emotionally safe school climates, and supporting bullying prevention programs is a primary obligation.
- Student learners benefit from high standards and alignment of general education instructors with best practices and education specialists. This also means ensuring sufficient and effective systems are in place to create professional learning communities for teachers. Valuing teachers values students.

Values Parents as Partners

- Finally our next Director must value parents as essential partners in education. They must communicate frequently and transparently, and sincerely invite and respect input from families, collaborating with community partners like the CAC.
- It is impossible for the District to build trust, without sharing information about its programs, services, and staffing. The new Director must listen, inform and discuss progress, accountability, and challenges that arise, in the parent's preferred language and with cultural sensitivity. Explicit outreach and support to underrepresented cultural and socioeconomic groups is imperative to reducing disproportionality and achieving equity for students with special needs.

The CAC appreciates this opportunity to share our priorities and participate in the process of selecting a new Special Education Director. We sincerely hope that the next Special Education Director takes the values of this community to heart and is compelled to include all families and students in the conversation.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Eng Lee and Christina Schmidt
on behalf of the Palo Alto Community Advisory Committee for Special Education

