

Dear Board Members, Superintendent Austin and Dr. Novak,

The budget report presented today is incomplete, in that it only addresses cuts and fails to incorporate any specific mention of the 2018 “Vision for Special Education” or 2018 “Dyslexia Guidelines Implementation Plan”. In fact, the presentation says “Only very judicious additions of budget additions in 2019-20”. Does that include Special Education and literacy reform?

Regarding “Explore options to increase the continuum of services to reduce the need for Non-Public School Placement”, we believe the hard decision for the district is that it will take 1-2 years for PAUSD to first invest in the programs and sites necessary to be prepared to accept back and serve Special Education students currently placed outside the district. The likely amount of this investment, to stay expense neutral, should be offset by the costs of the transportation and legal fees. The district may also see future cost savings if the district can provide the educational services at a reduced cost, though the district should survey the salaries of teachers in the private schools and the NPS’s. It may be likely that the district’s salary structure is higher than other schools, especially if the district has to hire teachers with special education or other specialized credentials.

A concern with the presentation of the Special Education budget report is the big increase in the “Other” category. This “Other” category has served as an undifferentiated catch-all which includes both mental health and non-educational expenses, so it would be best to disaggregate what is in “Other”. The goal here is to discern what is spent on compliance and educational services for special education students (FAPE) in this “Other” category.

Categories it would be helpful to see:

- Amount spent on non-public schools (NPS)
- Amount spent on private schools
- Amount spent on extra services (e.g., tutoring, dyslexia instruction for FAPE)
- Amount spent on mental health for special education students
- Amount spent on mental health for neurotypical students
- Amount spent on transportation
- Amount spent on legal fees with Special Education families (differentiate FAPE and legal settlement)

If the district does have a goal to bring most of the special education students back into district schools, which it could only do if it provided the appropriate programs at current or new sites, then to make the proper business decision, the district needs to know what it is spending on those services now.

It is a tough decision both financially and philosophically. Perhaps outsourcing special education services is cheaper, if you do not factor in transportation and legal fees. Nonetheless, there are non-economic reasons for keeping special education students in the district. The students themselves would likely benefit from being in the district as they would no longer need to travel so far, and could perhaps create more friendships and connections within their own community.

On the recommendation to “tighten Special Education procedures for assignment of aides”. The question of rising Special Education aide costs hinges on the quality of service/instruction for the dollars expended. The use of aides is inherently tied to the full inclusion approach that was not properly implemented in PAUSD. Without a cohesive and sustainable strategy for inclusion (like co-teaching, shared aides, push-in services, etc.) classroom support is relegated to presumed 1:1 student aides.

The 2018 “Vision for Special Education” has proposed a fuller supportive inclusion program with co-teaching starting in elementary school. Currently, our secondary schools have co-taught classes, however, it varies between schools. Do the budget cuts listed include a staff reconfiguration of the teaching models to support all students including general and special education needs (504s, IEPs, students needing Tier 2 support)? And

research has shown that intensive and intentional efforts to teach all students to read, earlier than now, has a favorable financial and an educational impact. If students with SLDs/dyslexia, who represent the largest number of special education students, are identified early in their educational lives, and then given proper services early on, then it is likely that the district will spend less later on for such students. As the old adage goes “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

In the first session recap, the Board asked for a “needs-driven approach to budgeting”. We find that this budget study fails to consider the needs of Special Education students, and points only to their costs. Ours, is not an “ill-guided” “stakeholder approach”, this is the law -- a Free and Appropriate Education. We have seen that, historically, the district will be spending the money for FAPE regardless of whether it is part of the budget and systemic reform, or otherwise expended through unbudgeted legal fees.

Thank you for your consideration.

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On behalf on the Palo Alto Council of PTA's and Palo Alto CAC for Special Education

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