

# Madera Unified School District

## Special Education Evaluation Final Report

Submitted  
by WestEd

July, 2018



WestEd — a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency — works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont, and Georgia, to Illinois, Arizona, and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. For more information about WestEd, visit [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org); call 415.565.3000 or, toll-free, (877) 4-WestEd; or write: WestEd, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.

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# Executive Summary

## Major Findings

This report aims to provide the Madera Unified School District (District) with an objective analysis and set of recommendations that can be used to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the Special Education Program, while honoring the strengths of the District's current structure and approach. The recommendations are intended to be used as a catalyst for dialogue within the District for further collaboration in charting a course for an effective and efficient program and services for all students with disabilities (SWD).

Changes in the enrollment rate for SWD are not aligned with changes in the enrollment rate for total students. Specifically, since 2013-14 both the District's total enrollment and the enrollment for SWD reflect an increasing trend. However, the enrollment for SWD has a cumulative increase of 9.3% compared to a cumulative increase of 3.9% for total enrollment.

The District's 2016-17 incidence of SWD of 10.5% is well below the countywide rate of 11.6% and the statewide rate of 12.1%. The District has the lowest rate among the comparison group, which ranged from 10.5% to 12.7%.

## Evaluation Notes

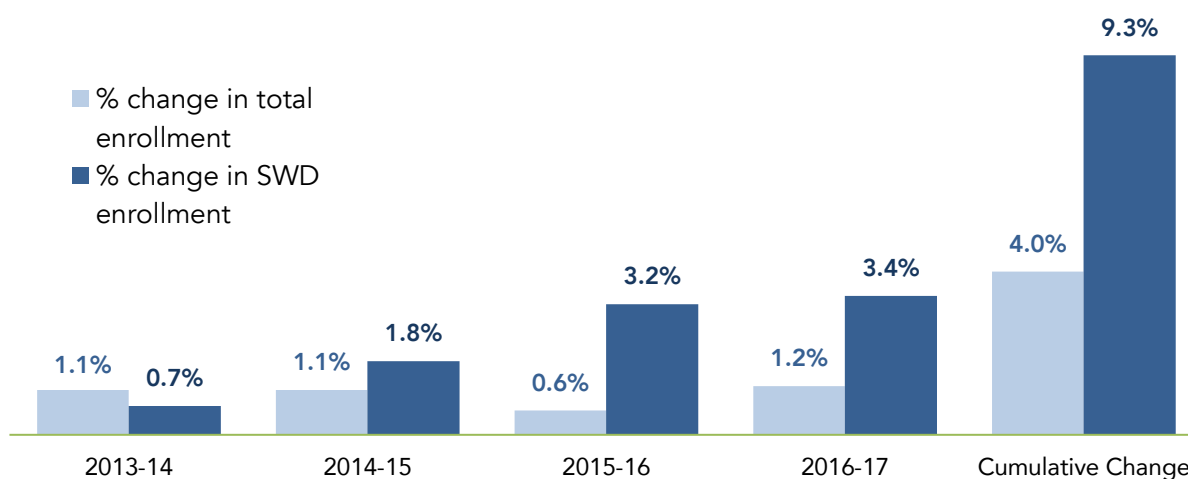
**Why:** This evaluation examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the District's special education program.

**How:** Our analyses are based on interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, and document reviews.

**Who:** Special and general education teachers, psychologists, special education paraprofessionals, and parents participated in this study.

**When:** The evaluation took place from October, 2017- May, 2018.

## Percent Change Enrollment



## District Comparison of SWD



## What We Found: Five Themes



### Theme 1: Structure, Student Enrollment, and Comparison Analysis

The District's SWD population has grown faster than the District's overall growth rate, which has impacted program size and cost.



### Theme 2: Program Operations

Recent program changes at the District level have impacted policies and procedures and have contributed to a slight sense of confusion for some teachers and staff regarding their roles and responsibilities.



### Theme 3: Program and Placement

Special education teachers voiced concern over the appropriate placement of SWD, challenges with differentiating instruction, and more relevant curriculum to meet the needs of these students in their classrooms.



### Theme 4: Professional Development

There is a continued need to provide school staff with high quality, system-wide professional development focused on implementing accommodations, differentiating instruction, improving behavior management, and optimizing SWD access to the general education curriculum.



### Theme 5: Culture and Climate

Substantial differences exist between sites in culture and climate in relation to special education program operations, leadership, and behavior management.

## Recommendation Highlights

**Theme 1: Structure, Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis.** The District should consider further study and disaggregation of the special education data. Disaggregation may reveal systemic weaknesses in special education placements and instructional practices. Example areas to explore are:

1. Review the District's identification practices to ensure that they are consistent across the District; pre-school through grade 12.
2. Explore the variances between statewide and the District's incidence of disability rates to ensure that current identification practices are not contributing to over identification of certain disabilities.

**Theme 2: Program Operations.** Consider developing a special education communication and messaging plan to increase clarity, consistency, and timeliness of communication between the District and administrators, teachers, and staff. Depending on the type of information, it will be important to consider: (1) what is communicated, (2) how it is communicated, and (3) who communicates the information. Establishing these processes will help build and maintain trust and a sense of purposeful communication across the district. Additionally, consider multiple options for communication such as district and school websites, emails, videos, and social media to reach the appropriate audiences. Short two-minute videos, for example, are a valuable way of letting educators know that there is a change in the way the district documents information in IEPs.

**Theme 3: Program and Placement.** Consider developing, articulating, and implementing a districtwide MTSS program. Such a system would potentially allow teachers and other staff to address student academic and behavioral needs outside of a special education setting and could serve to address any program placement concerns that teachers have. To implement MTSS, the District should consider selecting research-based, best-practice programs for Tiers 1, 2, and 3. After selection, on-going professional development would ensure implementation with fidelity. Effective professional development might include instructional coaches working directly with those implementing the programs.

**Theme 4: Professional Development.** Consider developing and implementing an annual professional development plan for teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. Identify specific staff needs through student outcome data, staff surveys, teacher goals, classroom observations, IEP reviews, and other similar information. A district special education PD council that meets regularly could provide valuable input into the development and implementation of this plan.

**Theme 5: Culture and Climate.** One overriding recommendation is for the District to examine the differences in attitudes toward SWD across school sites to address the beliefs that special education seen as a separate program that is "someone else's" responsibility. Engage both program

specialists and psychologists in leading groups in a discussion regarding the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders about schooling in general and SWD in particular. The groups should lead to the exploration of attitudes, development of common norms for supporting students, and focus on implementing bias-free, positive program culture.

## Madera Unified School District's Areas of Strength

The District has much to be proud of with respect to the strong sense of commitment of staff to serve all students. Strengths that emerged through our work with the District include positive classroom interactions, a climate that includes child-centered decisions, as well as special education teachers who we observed delivering strong instruction.

As evidenced throughout WestEd's data collection process, administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, staff, and families expressed a strong commitment to and pride in the special education program at the District.

During **classroom observations**, WestEd observed highly trained special education teachers who demonstrated rigorous instructional methodology. Additionally:

72% of observed teachers	Used graphic organizers or visual representations to support lessons.
94% of observed students	Stayed on task 76%-100% of the time.
In all (18) observed classrooms	Positive interactions were consistently evident.

1. All classrooms had learning aids (e.g., maps, charts, word walls) posted to provide support to the students.
2. Students and teachers were using the technology provided by the district.
3. Classrooms were well-supplied and well-equipped with supplemental resources.
4. Student work was posted in many classrooms.

These observations shed light on the school's learning environment. Specific routines and procedures that support a positive environment for learning were observed in all classrooms. Almost all classrooms displayed clear learning objectives statements. Other strengths include:

**Families** we surveyed responded positively when we asked them about closing the achievement gap, communication with school staff, and school culture and climate.

95%	I am treated with respect in my interactions with the teachers and school staff.
88%	My child's IEP indicates how progress toward goals will be measured.
81%	My child's teachers recognize my child's strengths.
90%	I understand my rights as a parent of a child on an IEP.
75%	My child is making progress on IEP goals.
79%	My child's teachers have high expectations for my child's achievement at school.

**Special education teachers and paraprofessionals** shared their appreciation of recent changes to improve the department during interviews and focus groups.



*District office feels like they've been trained and know the same things. There's consistency now.*

*Communication is good. In the past, not always. This year--definitely. In the past, we really had no idea what was going on and didn't hear from the director at the district level.*

**Administrators, teachers, and families** viewed collaborative teacher partnership classes (co-labs) as a critical asset in the district that benefitted not only special education but all students.



*All of the classes are benefitting from the two teachers. Students don't differentiate between teachers.*

*I've been teaching for 16 years. Co-lab is effective for student learning. I've seen how students can step it up from special education to co-lab.*

Many of the co-lab teachers we interviewed told us they feel the model works well and hope to maintain influence over planning and implementation. Specifically, they reported that the District has gotten better at matching special and general education teachers. They requested planning time with each other to ensure that they keep instruction high quality and the integrity of the model effective.

# Introduction

Special education programs exist within a larger educational system and are designed to serve the educational needs of students who require additional support to meet the educational outcomes identified by the student, parents, teachers and other team members. Well-designed special education programs are collegial and inclusive, and are part of a continuum of services and supports to meet the diverse needs of students with individual education plans. A well-implemented special education system is both effective and efficient in the delivery of special education services that meet the academic and functional goals needs of the students in the district.

Madera Unified School District (District) contracted with WestEd to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the District's special education program. The District's goal for this study is to understand how to best improve overall organizational and programmatic capacity to support the progress of SWD in an efficient and effective manner. WestEd's approach to reviewing the special education program is drawn from research on systems thinking, organizational development, leadership and instructional practices, and school system structures designed to support all learners.

This report aims to provide the District with an objective analysis and set of recommendations that can be used to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the special education program, while honoring the strengths of the District's current structure and approach. It is important to note that there are many assets within the District that it is responsible for creating, implementing, and maintaining, and we witnessed many of them. As the purpose of the evaluation was to identify areas of improvement for the special education program, this report focuses on those elements. Furthermore, the recommendations are intended to be used as a catalyst for dialogue within the District to further collaboration in charting a course for an effective and efficient program and services for all students. This report presents the analysis of findings from all data sources, organized into five key themes. The report includes areas of strength, a discussion of each of the five themes, key findings, importance of the finding, and recommendations for possible actions to consider as "next steps" for the District. The special education program is competently run by staff dedicated to ensuring the program is compliant, of high quality, and cost conscious. The style and structure used to manage the special education program has its strengths and areas of improvement. Among the strengths has been attention to program quality and overall compliance. It should be noted that while we consider the strengths of the program to be considerable and deserving of commendation, the purpose of this study is to offer recommendations for improvement. Hence, this report places more focus on identified gaps, since they are the basis for improvement. **The fact that more words and space are dedicated to areas for improvement should not be taken as a sign that they outweigh the strengths.**



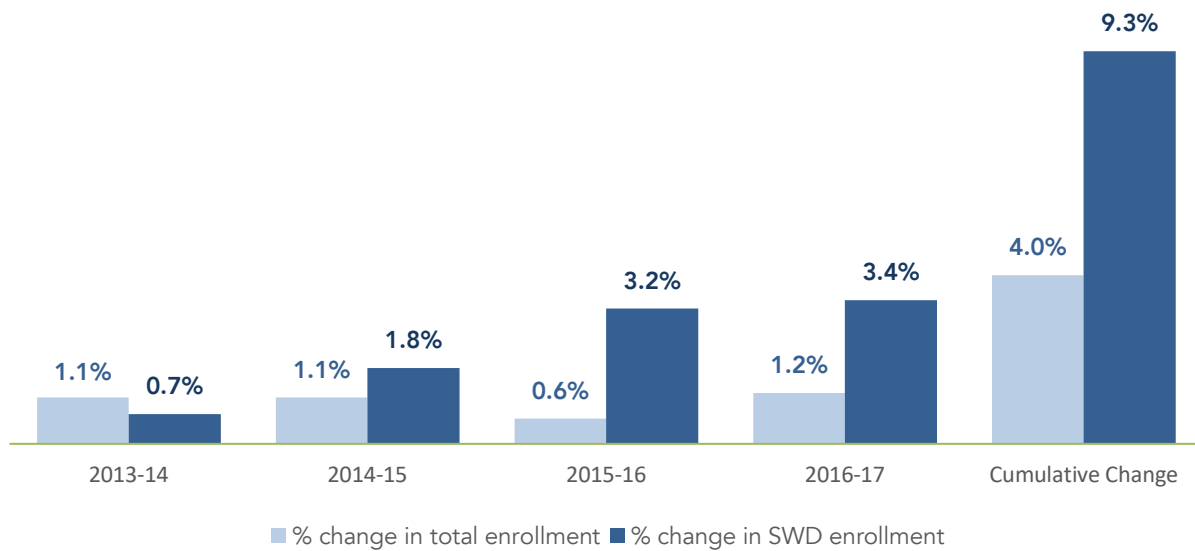
# Theme 1: Structure, Student Enrollment, and Comparison Analysis

The District's SWD population has grown faster than the District's overall growth rate, which has impacted program size and cost.

## Key Findings

- Changes in the enrollment rate for SWD are not aligned with changes in the enrollment rate for total students (see Figure 1). Specifically, since 2013-14 both the District's total enrollment and the enrollment for SWD reflect an increasing trend. However, the enrollment for SWD has a cumulative increase of 9.3% compared to a cumulative increase of 3.9% for total enrolment (see Figure 1).
  - Growth within cohorts of SWD over time enrollment is noted in the elementary and middle school cohorts. Additionally, when comparing 2015-16 to 2106-17 the preschool enrollment for SWD grew by 24 students or more than 15% (see Figure 2).
  - When considering the overall enrollment of SWD, more than 32% of the increase between 2013-14 and 2016-17 have a primary disability of Speech and Language Impairment (SLI). The number of SWD with primary disabilities of Other Heath Impairment (OHI), Autism, and Emotional Disturbance have also increased by approximately 31%, 30%, and 20%, respectively. The number of students with a primary disability of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) has declined by 27.3%.
  - When considering just the preschool SWD enrollment, most of the growth is in primary disabilities of OHI with more than 43% growth and SLI with more than 22% growth.
- The District's 2016-17 incidence of SWD of 10.5% is well below the countywide rate of 11.6% and the statewide rate of 12.1%. The District has the lowest rate among the comparison group, which ranged from 10.5% to 12.7% (see Figure 3).

**Figure 1. MUSD percent change in total enrollment and SWD district of residence enrollment since 2013-14**



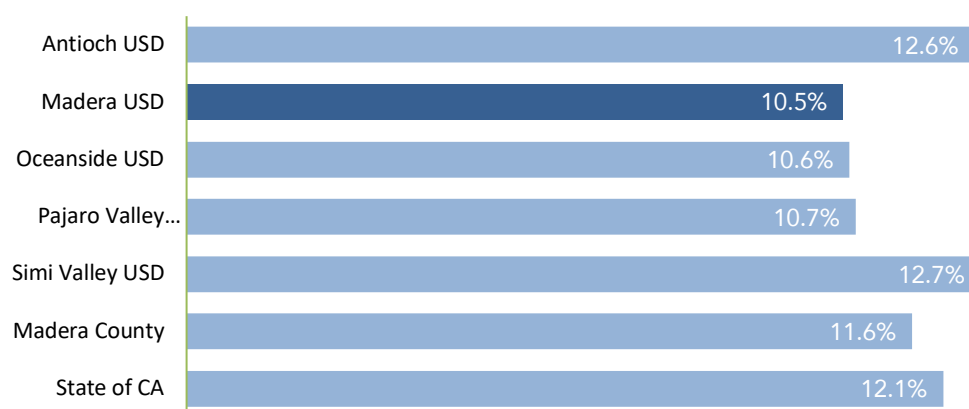
Source: California Department of Education DataQuest

**Figure 2. MUSD special education district of residence enrollment cohort analysis**

Grade/Group	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
Infant	58	56	71	61
Preschool	180	156	140	151
K	126	144	118	97
1	146	118	131	143
2	122	133	137	108
3	134	126	118	122
4	148	130	137	126
5	153	150	144	162
6	166	166	167	155
7	174	171	165	144
8	183	163	147	138
9	158	154	133	139
10	156	137	149	161
11	133	137	155	128
12	140	157	119	156
Post-Secondary	49	59	61	63
<b>Total</b>	<b>2226</b>	<b>2157</b>	<b>2092</b>	<b>2054</b>

Source: District provided data

**Figure 3. MUSD percent of SWD district of residence enrollment in comparison districts in 2016-17**

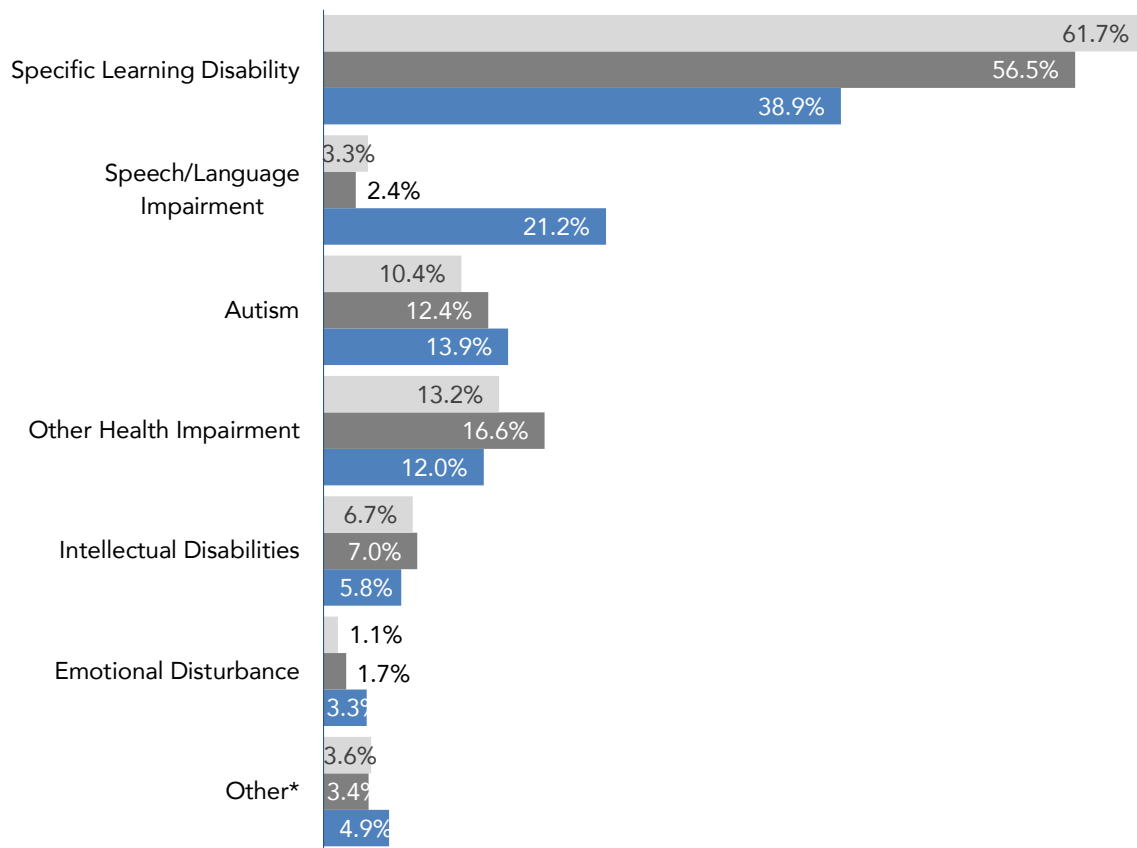


Source: EdData and the California Department of Education

### Key Findings (continued)

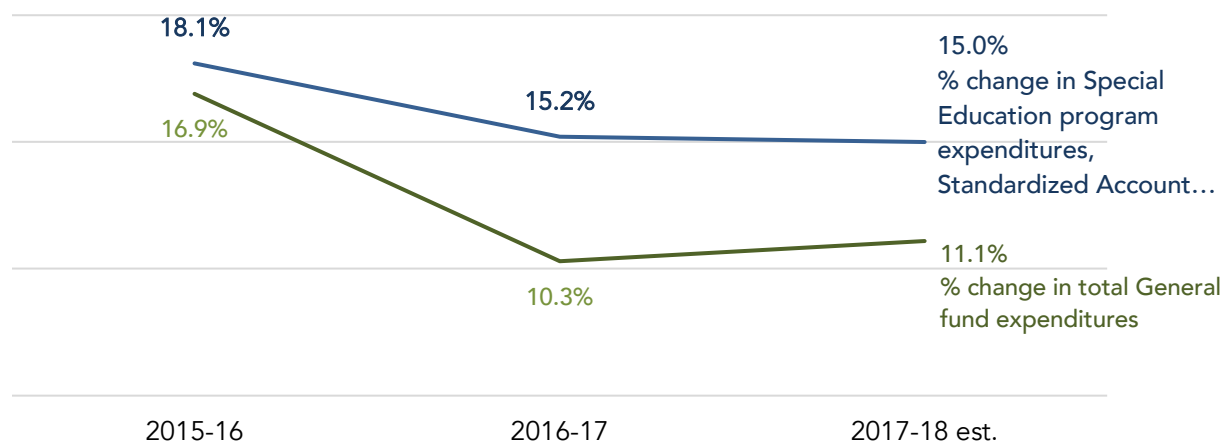
- There have been changes in the proportion of the District's incidence of disabilities by type over time. The District's 2016-17 incidence of disability rates for Intellectual Disability (ID), Speech and Language Impairment (SLI) and other disabilities notably exceed state rates. Autism and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) are well below state rates (see Figure 4).
- Districts with high rates of students with a primary disability of SLI often find that they are yielding to parent or teacher requests for additional services, which are lacking in general education interventions.
- While it is not unusual to see educational program costs increase over time due to costs that can increase on the natural each year (e.g., expenditure classifications such as staff compensation and statutory and health and welfare benefits) that impact all district programs, including special education, the rate of expenditure increase for the Special Education Program is higher than the rate of increase for the District's overall budget (see Figure 5). Furthermore, revenue sources that support special education have generally been flat over time which has an impact on the amount of local contributions necessary to support special education programs.
- The cost of the Special Education Program is estimated to increase by more than 56% between 2014-15 and 2017-18 (see Figure 6). As with most programs and supports that are part of K-12 education, personnel comprise the clear majority of program expenses. Therefore, it is not unexpected that more than 85% of the cost increase in the special education program is in staff compensation. We note that the District utilizes staffing formulas to support how it manages site and district staffing levels.

**Figure 4. Proportion of disability incidence in District in 2013-14 and 2014-15 and State in 2016-17**



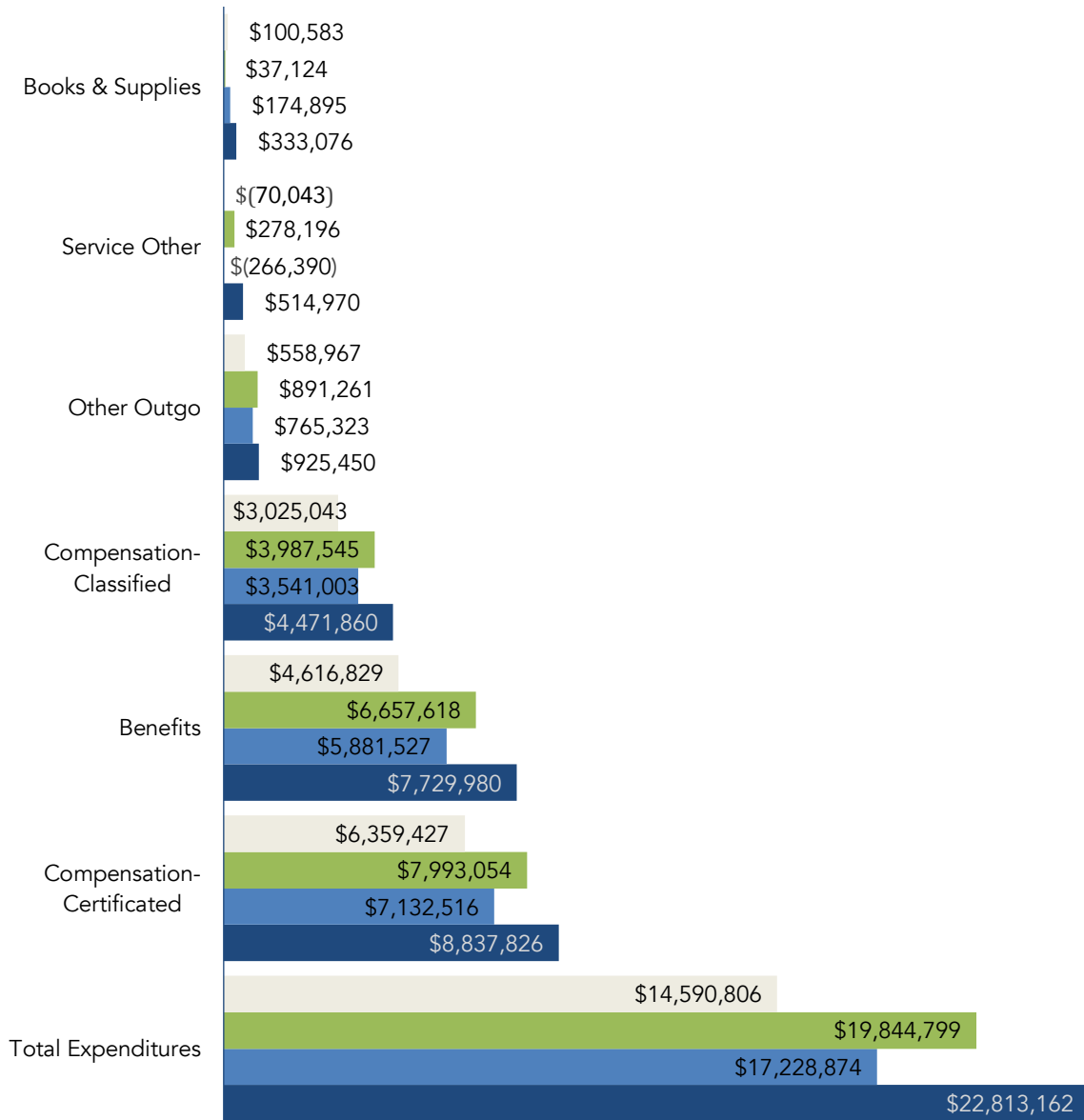
Source: District provided data and DataQuest \*Includes Hard of Hearing, Deaf, Visual Impairment, Deaf and Blind, Orthopedically Impaired, Traumatic Brain Injury, Established Medical Disability

**Figure 5. Comparison of year-over-year cost for general and special education**



Source: District provided data

**Figure 6. Special education expenditures, SACS goal classification 5700  
unrestricted and restricted general fund, by type in 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16,  
and 2017-18 (estimated)**

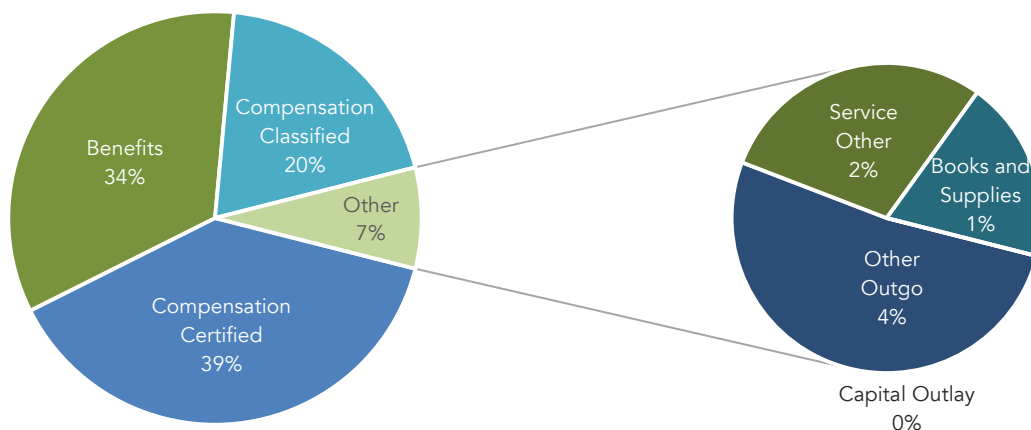


Source: District provided data

### Key Findings (continued)

- And, while representing smaller percentages of the overall Special Education Program budget the cost of contracted services and supplies have both experienced significant increases, more than \$580,000 and \$230,000, respectively since 2014-15 (see Figure 7). Lastly, other outgo has increased over time as a function of the application of the District's indirect cost rate to the increased Special Education Program expenditures.
- The staffing level for speech and language pathologist is below the staffing level of both the County and state and the District ranks last in the comparison group. The District's staffing level for the school psychologists is also below the staffing level of both the County and state and the District ranks third in the comparison group (see Figure 9).
- Despite the growing proportion of District resources contributed to support programs for SWD, special education program expenditures account for nearly 9% of all expenditures, fairly close to the proportion of students receiving special education services (10.7%), and well below the statewide average of 20% of overall resources for such expenditures.

**Figure 7. Expenditure type as a percentage of the special education program SACS goal classification 5700 unrestricted and restricted general fund 2017-18 (Estimated)**



**Figure 9. Staff analysis of comparison districts 2016-17**

	Speech & Language Pathologists Assignment codes 0211 and 0212/ all pupils	Psychologists Assignment codes 0202 and 0216/ all pupils	Program Specialist Assignment codes 0244/ all pupils
Antioch USD	1,333	963	17,326
Madera USD	1,385	1,299	3,463
Oceanside USD	625	589	6,876
Simi Valley USD	857	1,559	4,287
Madera County	1,311	1,210	1,573
State of CA	1,104	1,050	

Source: DataQuest

Note: Chart reflects number of staff rather than full time equivalents. Staff can be counted under more than one assignment code.

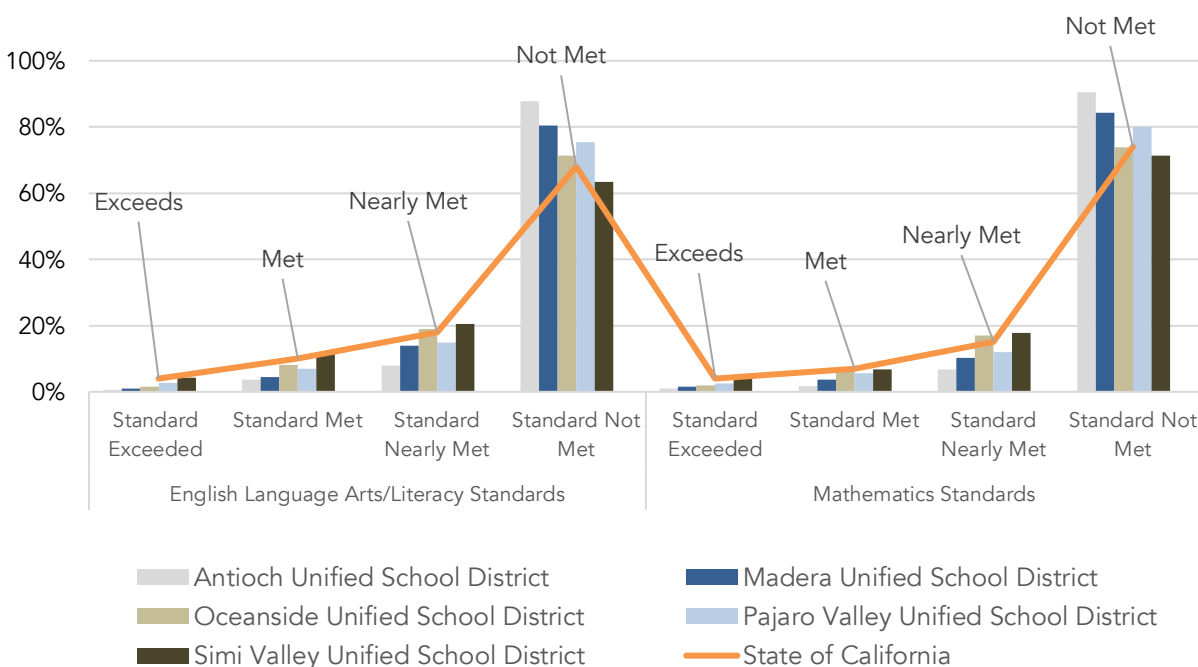
\* Used contracted staff count for comparative purposes.

\*\* No data listed on DataQuest.

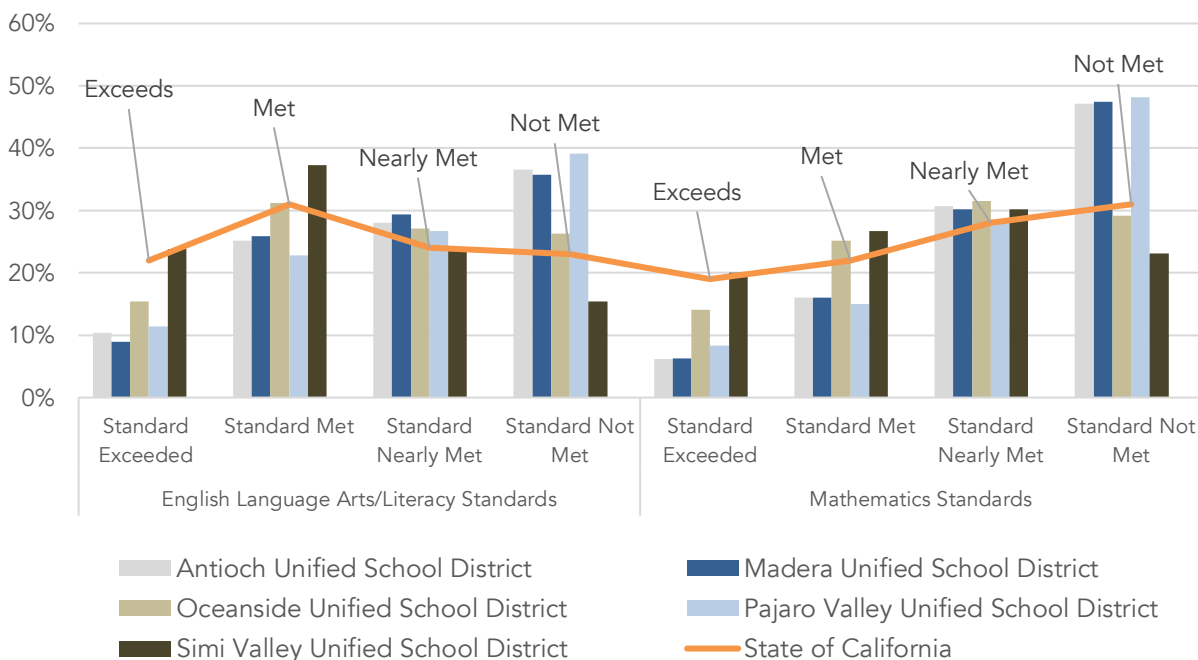
### **Key Findings (continued)**

- MUSD 2016-17 CAASPP results indicate that 80% and 84% of SWD did not meet performance standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Math respectively, while 36% and 47% of students with no reported disabilities did not meet performance standards for ELA and Math respectively (see Figures 10 and 11).
- The percentage of students with and without disabilities that did not meet standards are approximately 10% to 15% more than the statewide average. This indicates that the District should evaluate both curriculum and instruction to ensure all students have the necessary support to meet or exceed standards.

**Figure 10. Comparison district 2016-17 CAASPP results for students with a reported disability**



**Figure 11. Comparison district 2016-17 CAASPP results for students with no reported disability**



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## Why it Matters

The design and costs of most educational programs, including special education, are affected by the number of students; type and skills of available staff; and policies, structures, and practices that affect program design and quality. Throughout the country special education programs are often cited as costly with varying degrees of reported impact or effectiveness. Districts with highly effective education programs have efficient processes, staff capacity to complete critical functions and activities with high quality, and levels of staff that are cost-effective.

Given the way funding is provided in California to support SWD, there is a deliberate negative financial incentive to identifying students who should receive special education services if their needs can be met adequately and appropriately through other interventions and/or programs. Additionally, it is important for program planning purposes to routinely review trends on the incidence of disabilities by type over time to illuminate areas where the District may need to consider creating or phasing out programs and potential areas of over identification.

Addressing challenges with “first instruction in the general curriculum” will help to remedy some of the problems that occur in special education: the over-identification of certain ethnic groups, the large numbers of children who are given questionable “learning disabilities” labels, and the subsequent funding problems that schools face when their special education enrollments are high while their funding for specialized supports and services is limited.”<sup>1</sup> Creating an optimal environment for best first teaching and implementing a district-wide MTSS model (see Theme 2) will contribute to supporting the learning of all students through clarity and ownership of all staff members and stakeholders and ultimately provide greater access to SWD.

As with most programs and supports that are part of K-12 education, personnel comprise the clear majority of program expenses. Utilizing staffing ratios, performing routine reviews of staffing levels and assignments, and the effectiveness of position functions are an important part of ensuring that special education services are cost effective and of high quality.

The cost of educational services is driven by factors which include but are not limited to the: (1) number of students, (2) way services are provided, (3) quality and responsiveness of such services to meet students’ needs, and (4) District’s systematic organization of instructional services and support staff. If students receiving special education services continue to grow both in numbers and proportionality when compared to overall enrollment, this will contribute to the imbalance noted between the increases in costs for the special education program compared to those for the district’s overall educational program. Growth in this imbalance will create budget tension over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Balcom, F. (2011). The Special Edge, Letter from the Editor

## Recommendations

The District should consider further study and disaggregation of the special education data. Disaggregation may reveal systemic weaknesses in special education placements and instructional practices. Example areas to explore are:

1. Review the District's identification practices to ensure that they are consistent across the District; pre-school through grade 12.
2. Explore the variances between statewide and the District's incidence of disability rates to ensure that current identification practices are not contributing to over identification of certain disabilities.

Furthermore, we recommend the District explore the following questions to determine if trends are changing:

- a. Is best first instruction and support within the general education environment, (e.g., speech and language and behavioral) in place at all levels to remedy potential over identification of certain learning disabilities?
- b. Do pre-school IEPs have exit dates for services?
- c. Is there consistency in MTSS across the district?
- d. Are variances between academic outcomes between the District Special Education Programs by site or grade level explored to determine areas of excellence that can be transferred or areas of weakness that need targeted support?

As the District digs deeper into existing data, this will lead to increased understanding of the entire system.

## Theme 2: Program Operations

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Recent program changes at the District level have impacted policies and procedures and have contributed to a slight sense of confusion for some teachers and staff regarding their roles and responsibilities.

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### Key Findings

#### Communication and Messaging

- Teachers across the elementary, middle, and high schools are concerned that Program Specialists are not delivering the same messages both across and within assigned sites.
- When offering recommendations for improving services, special education teachers and paraprofessionals requested clarity and consistency from the district in terms of messaging and implementation of guidelines, processes, and practices.

#### Policies and Procedures

- Throughout their interviews and focus groups, administrators, teachers, and staff reflected on special education and its transition from Education Services to Special Services. They discussed revisions to policies and practices, such as Individual Education Plans, referrals, transitions, paraprofessional placement, and staff evaluations. Numerous teachers cited frequent requests to modify their IEP documents or for the transfer of paraprofessionals who they worked well with and had trained. Some school psychologists voiced concerns about program specialists (rather than site administration) evaluating their work performance. Many viewed these adjustments and accommodations as unclear.
- According to survey results, 57% of respondents agreed that school administrators delivered consistent messages regarding special education administrative policies and procedures, while 56% agreed that district administrators performed similarly.
- According to findings from interviews, focus groups, and survey responses, the District's pre-referral and identification processes are not commonly understood and consistently implemented across schools and among teachers.
- Forty-nine percent of teachers believe that criteria for **referring** students to special education are not clear. However, more teachers agreed that criteria for **exiting** students are clear (72%).

## In Their Own Voices

In reviewing the data collected, the following quotes best support this theme:

*Clarity for change of placement procedures and procedures for exiting special education is needed.*

*Some administrators have a clear understanding, and some do not of the needs for support and how these are carried out for SWD. It is an inconsistent message for the staff and often frustrating for the special education department to have to correct perceptions.*

*Communication across my school site is good. Communication across the district is very choppy...From what I understand, the misplacement of students coming into the high school has been an issue for many years. This was an issue at my previous high school as well and it was the district office Program Specialist who opened the communication between the school sites to ensure the problem would be fixed.*

*I feel like each Program Specialist has their own ways of how they want IEPs written. So, once you get used to one and if for some reason you happen to get a different one the following year, it feels like you are starting all over again.*

*Teachers should all be held at the same standard for turning in and completing paperwork.*

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## Why it Matters

A district's leadership and the local board of education keep the mission and vision at the forefront of districtwide deliberations and decision-making. They also provide essential guidance and support for schools. The district must have the capacity to develop and articulate both a vision and a set of practices that send a clear message of what schools and programs are modeled.<sup>2</sup> The authenticity of this message is affirmed through the District's development of a strategic plan for special education that manifests the vision and, then by district actions, establishes the conditions necessary for principals and teacher leaders to effectively implement the special education program. The operations, then, should be seen as the tactical activities that keep the program running smoothly.

Communication in schools has been widely studied in terms of type, frequency, and medium. Effective communication has been shown to improve productivity, increase job satisfaction, and have a positive effect on absenteeism and turnover rates.<sup>3</sup> Effective communication leads to improved organizational outcomes.

While a strong and engaged District Office is crucial to achieving significant school improvement, leadership must be distributed to build a solid commitment among all staff and stakeholders.

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<sup>2</sup> Wallace Foundation, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Ellis, Zook & Lyles, 1990

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Principals, teachers, school staff, and content area specialists can all play a role in the effective leadership of a school site.<sup>4</sup> In addition, district leadership has been found to have a positive influence on turning around low-performing schools.<sup>5</sup> The District supports overarching policy and procedure coherence and can ensure that schools have the necessary resources to maintain improvements that help advance the achievement of SWD and their peers.<sup>6</sup>

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## Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested actions that would provide a sense of common purpose, direction, language and actions across the District's special education programs.

**Recommendation 1:** Consider developing/updating the District vision and mission regarding special education. A clear vision and mission provides a common understanding of the purposes and goals for the special education program, and will address concerns around a consistent direction by school staff. Vision and mission statements answer the questions: Why do we exist? Who do we serve? What is our purpose? How do we aspire to serve? What are our values? Include all stakeholders in the development of the statement and share widely.

**Recommendation 2:** Create a comprehensive special education district handbook. The handbook will ideally articulate the pre-referral and identification process for students; evaluation and eligibility determination; IEP development, monitoring and accountability processes; exit criteria for students; staffing roles, responsibilities, and ratios; parent roles and responsibilities; district policies and other related topics. The handbook would provide clarity and guidance for administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and students regarding the entire program. The special education handbook should be the "go to" document for a variety of audiences to ensure consistent direction and interpretation. Program specialists can then deliver consistent messages both within and across sites.

**Recommendation 3:** Consider developing a special education communication and messaging plan to increase clarity, consistency, and timeliness of communication between the District and administrators, teachers, and staff. Depending on the type of information, it will be important to consider: (1) what is communicated, (2) how it is communicated, and (3) who communicates the information. Establishing these processes will help build and maintain trust and a sense of purposeful communication across the district. Additionally, consider multiple options for communication such as district and school websites, emails, videos, and social media to reach the appropriate audiences. For example, short two-minute videos developed by the District Office are a valuable and reliable way of letting educators know that there is a change in the way the district documents information in IEPs.

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<sup>4</sup> Shannon & Bylsma, 2004;

<sup>5</sup> Baroody, 2011

<sup>6</sup> Fullan, Betani, & Quinn, 2004; Huberman et al., 2011; Lane, 2009

## Theme 3: Program and Placement

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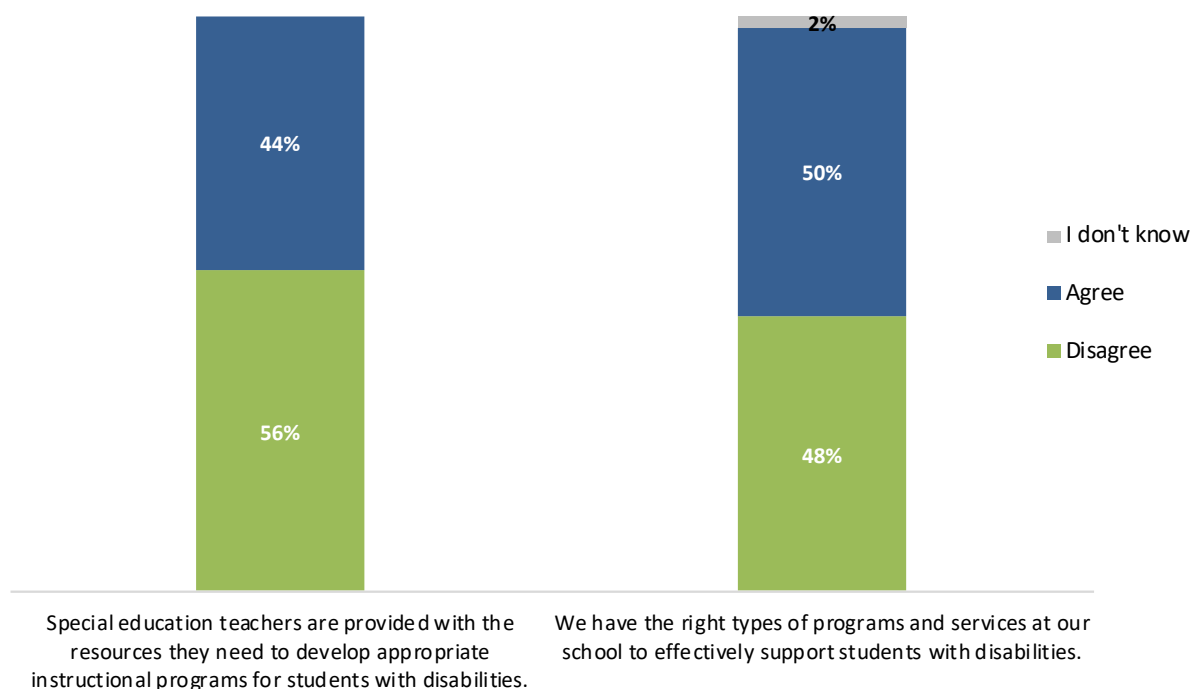
**Special education teachers voiced concern over the appropriate placement of SWD, challenges with differentiating instruction, and more relevant curriculum to meet the needs of these students in their classrooms.**

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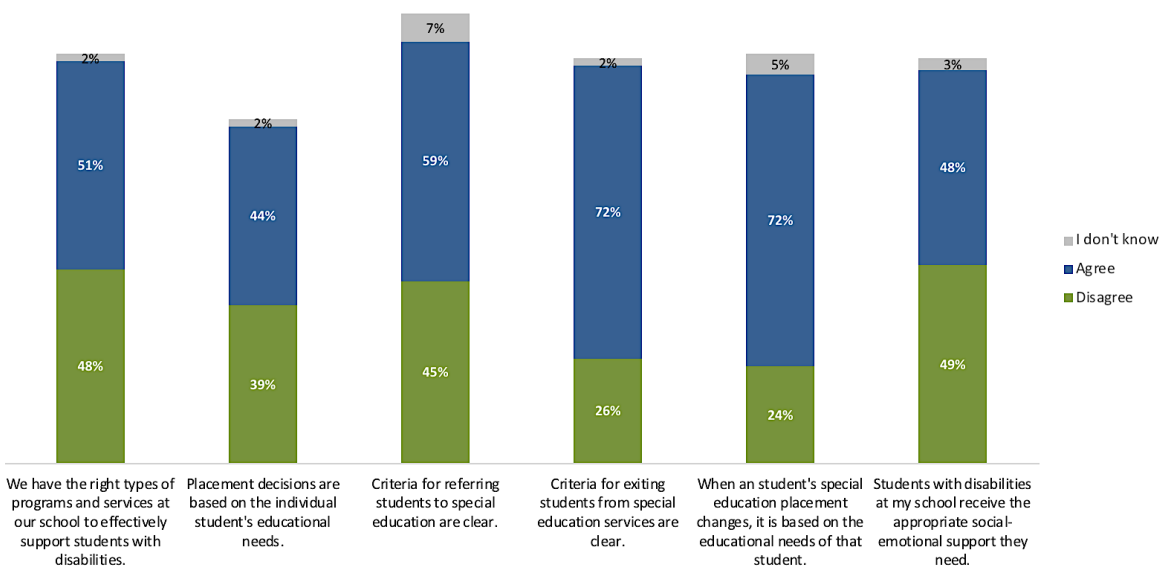
### Key Findings

- When providing feedback on how to close the achievement gap, teachers and paraprofessionals overwhelmingly cited (1) more appropriate placement of special education students and (2) more relevant curriculum aligned with common core standards and research. They also raised concerns that general education teachers did not fully support accommodations for students with IEPs.
- During their interviews and focus groups, most 210 instructors estimated that their classes were no more than one or two days behind the general curriculum. In contrast, teachers who taught 110 classes or in the school day class (SCD), autism (AP), or resource specialist programs (RSP) shared less positive views about their students' access to the general curriculum. They noted that new resources, such as Goalbook or WonderWorks, were not relevant due to the wide range of abilities represented among their students. Many of them noted that given the spectrum of students' needs in their classrooms, they were forced to "modify the curriculum modifications."
- Based on survey results, 56% of special education teachers agreed that they were provided with resources to develop appropriate instructional programs for SWD. Similarly, 45% agreed that general education teachers were provided with these resources (see Figure 12).
- Over half (56%) of the teachers agreed that they have the right types of programs and services at their school to effectively support SWD (see Figure 13).

**Figure 12. Teachers' perceptions of resources and programs/services**



**Figure 13. There is a relatively even split regarding teachers' belief of programs, services, and placement.**



## In Their Own Voices

In reviewing the data collected, the following quotes best support this theme.

*We have many students not performing near grade level and still require phonics and reading interventions. It doesn't seem like we have a consistent set of [intervention] materials to support students' needs in this area.*

*Students are not placed appropriately. We have students who are at grade level in the same classes as students who are several (3-4) grade levels behind. Having students at varying ability levels is good but the gaps we have disservice most students. It causes the students who are significantly behind, to not participate and the students ready to move on, extremely bored*

*The Wonderworks intervention that was provided for 3rd and 4th grades is awesome. I wish they could expand that to all grade levels. I have had a lot of success with the program for my 3rd/4th graders. Don't just leave it up to the teacher to create their own programs.*

*I believe that there should be training to all staff (general education as well as special education) showing and explaining accommodations and how to differentiate instruction for the optimal success of the students.*

*Appropriate resources aligned with core curriculum that are provided by MUSD for all grade levels and multiple abilities. They are available for purchase, but have not been purchased for all students that need them as of yet.*

*There needs to be more placement options for students. Students who are high functioning but socially deficient need support. We need options for students who are low but not low enough for county placement.*

*Too many of our special education students are NOT properly placed. By the time they are identified and correctly placed, much time has passed and it has taken a toll on their self-esteem.*

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## Why It Matters

As the MUSD Special Education program continues its commitment to ensuring the least restrictive environment for special education students, there is a critical need to nurture and propagate a shared mindset among teachers, administrators, and staff not only in the program but across the district. Throughout interviews, focus groups, observations, and surveys, a majority (certainly not all) of the participants regularly raised three common areas of concern. They were the: (1) the appropriate placement of students into special education, (2) concern that schools were not meeting students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs while in the special education program, and (3) possibility of offering a vocational track to prepare them after exiting high school. To be sure, such concerns are informed by individual experiences and observations. However, taken as a whole, they at times pointed to a larger issue of focusing on the separation

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of special education students from the general education curriculum and student population rather than presuming the **inclusion** of these students into general classrooms. At each step of these students' progression through the District, both general and special education teacher and staff out of concern (and sometimes frustration) discussed how this population of students requires alternative paths, tracks, or spaces. Given this deep mindset, there is an opportunity for the District to work closely with teachers, administrators, and staff to investigate its source and collaboratively discuss ways to transform this more traditional notion of viewing SWD to better serve all students in the District. It is often the case that teachers' mindsets and concerns about including SWD reflect their aspirations to run an effective and efficient classroom where SWD learn from their instruction and engage in positive academic experiences. Given this, the District will benefit from exploring more deeply with teachers and staff as a first step to understanding the root cause of the concerns.

Using a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model, ALL student learning is supported through clear initiatives and resources as well as continuous improvement. MTSS provides a framework for designing and organizing system-wide resources, strategies, and practices, which result in improved **academic, behavioral, and social outcomes** for all learners. MTSS is an integrated comprehensive framework that focuses on the Common Core State Standards (CCCS), core instruction, differentiated learning, student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and the alignment of the systems necessary for academic, behavioral, and social success. School districts generally begin implementation of a robust MTSS system with the implementation of Response to Intervention (RtI) programs for academic needs and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) systems to address student behavior. While these programs are supportive, a sound MTSS system moves beyond the identification of some students needing support to the understanding that all students require robust instructional and behavioral supports.

Implementing MTSS involves significant paradigm shifts. Often, past RtI programs were structured with a focus on interventions for a few students. In comparison, MTSS systematically addresses prevention for all students. MTSS moves from identifying which students need help, to specific assistance to support each student's needs. This shift requires districts and schools to move from having programs and people available, to intentional design and redesign of services and supports matched to the needs of students. MTSS is not a wait to fail model, and through universal screening and regular progress monitoring, student needs are quickly identified, allowing for earlier intervention.

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## Recommendations

The following recommendations address special education program and placement.

**Recommendation 1:** Consider developing, articulating, and implementing a districtwide MTSS program. Such a system would potentially allow teachers and other staff to address student academic and behavioral needs outside of a special education setting and could serve to address any program placement concerns that teachers have. To implement MTSS, the District should consider selecting research-based, best-practice programs for Tiers 1, 2, and 3. After selection, on-going professional development would ensure implementation with fidelity. Effective professional development might include instructional coaches working directly with those implementing the programs.

**Recommendation 2:** Consider meeting with core teams of teachers to deeply examine the pre-referral/referral process. In leading this process, the District can uncover the root cause of teacher concerns, and it will allow the District to determine any (1) challenges or gaps related to pre-referral/referral process, (2) discrepancies and/or lack of understanding of the process. It is important to note that an optimal pre-referral intervention process uses a problem-solving team to identify, develop, and implement effective interventions and teaching strategies to support at risk students to achieve improved performance to reduce possible over identification of students into special education programs. Furthermore, such a process reflects a highly collaborative approach to providing support to all students, which treats policy, process, and practice within general education as a service to all students with special education supports. It is apparent that the District Office is striving to embed in its system and leadership teams the idea that good first instruction and access to the general curriculum support the growth of SWD both academically and functionally. As there are many teachers and paraprofessionals concerned with appropriate placement, allowing teachers the opportunity to define, reflect on and resolve their own problem of practice would increase the connection between teacher inquiry and reflection and outcomes for SWD.

## Theme 4: Professional Development

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There is a continued need to provide school staff with high quality, system-wide professional development focused on implementing accommodations and adaptations, differentiating instruction, improving behavior management, and optimizing SWD access to the general education curriculum.

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### Key Findings

- In 59% of the survey responses, special education teachers agreed that they had sufficient opportunities to learn about the general education curriculum and instructional programs. In contrast, only 15% agreed that their general education counterparts had similar opportunities to learn about special education curriculum and instructional programs. In their comments, a majority of respondents requested that general education teachers and paraprofessionals receive professional development on special education topics and practices.
- Both general and special education teachers communicated frustration in their interviews and focus groups with the district's new professional development approach, claiming the district-led sessions were not as relevant to their work with special education students as the former PD method (i.e., stipend) allowed them access to.
- Over half of all special education teachers agreed that there were opportunities to share their expertise across the district (52%). In interviews, focus groups, and survey comments, high school and middle school teachers suggested professional learning focused on exemplary collaborative teaching partnerships in the district. Many of them viewed these co-labs as assets that should be developed and expanded to serve all students.
- In survey responses, 56% of special education teachers agreed that paraprofessionals have a clear understanding of their professional roles, while most paraprofessionals (76%) believe that they have a clear understanding of their own roles. This difference is worth exploring.

## In Their Own Voices

In reviewing the data collected, the following quotes best support the professional development theme.

*As special education teachers we receive professional development within our district, but it would be helpful to receive information about additional special education professional development available in our area that would benefit us as educators.*

*We are not being properly trained on how to complete our IEPs. Each program specialist gives us a different answer on how to complete a certain section to the same area. Our special services director corrects our IEPs and sends it back to us through our program specialist. Completing a future IEP from the corrections we received from our director from the previous IEP, will always have new changes. No consistency is there.*

*I believe that there should be training to all staff (general education as well as special education) showing and explaining accommodations and how to differentiate instruction for the optimal success of the students.*

*Majority of our general education teachers do not understand what a 210 co-lab class should look like and how it should run. General education teachers need to learn how to accommodate their students and scaffold work to help support their students that have an IEP, instead of just saying to the special education teachers, "These are your students, you deal with them."*

*Need to communicate to para pros when and where supportive, encouraging and instructive seminars are available for them. Make the process for approved days off and available financing clear.*

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## Why It Matters

Best practices for developing inclusive schools include ongoing, job embedded professional development that is viewed as a collaborative process should combine both training and coaching. Ideally, it is embedded in the daily work of teaching and learning activities and cultivated by a community that includes teachers, school staff, and administration.<sup>7</sup>

Providing school leaders and classroom teachers with high-quality professional learning opportunities is a core responsibility of school districts. Although not all workshops or trainings lead to powerful changes in classroom practice, when professional development systems are tied to staff needs and ongoing support systems, there is great potential for improvement. Professional

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<sup>7</sup>Jorgensen, McSheehan, Schuh & Sonnenmeier, 2012

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development is effective when leaders ensure that professional learning is coordinated, capacity building is continuous, and staff are making progress toward a shared goal.<sup>8</sup>

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) “Schools that are strategic in creating time and productive working relationships within academic departments or grade levels, across them, or among teachers schoolwide, the benefits can include greater consistency in instruction, more willingness to share practices and try new ways of teaching, and more success in solving problems of practice.”

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## Recommendations

The following recommendations address special education professional development systems.

**Recommendation 1:** Consider developing and implementing an annual professional development plan for teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. Identify specific staff needs through student outcome data, staff surveys, teacher goals, classroom observations, IEP reviews, and other similar information. A district special education PD council that meets regularly could provide valuable input into the development and implementation of this plan.

**Recommendation 2:** Consider expanding the types of professional development in the district. Teacher-centered professional development offers an alternative to traditional workshop approaches. Increase professional development opportunities. Staff is hungry and open to opportunities to deepen their understanding and expertise on how to serve all students. Possible areas to explore based on staff survey and interview responses include:

- Classroom management
- Collaborative planning, co-teaching
- Differentiating instruction
- Evidence-based instructional strategies in mathematics and/or Reading
- Supporting and accommodating SWD

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<sup>8</sup> Fullan, Bertani, & Quinn, 2004



## Theme 5: Culture and Climate

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**Substantial differences exist between sites in culture and climate in relation to special education program operations, leadership, and behavior management.**

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### Key Findings

- When discussing the support they received at their respective sites, special education teachers at two competitive high schools differed greatly in their responses. While educators at one high school described their program specialists as primary leaders providing support, their counterparts at another high school referred to the school's vice principal and chair of the department as the primary leaders providing support.
- Differences across schools were similarly apparent in survey responses. Almost 40% of special education teachers agreed that curriculum and instructional methods/implementation were consistent across schools. Another 46% agreed that workload was equitably distributed across special education staff in the district.
- In their comments, participants frequently mentioned divisions across the district between special education and general education teachers, administrators and teachers, and RSP, AP, and SCD teachers. They described a lack of equity and trust, inconsistencies between sites in terms of resources, materials, and support from administrators, and differences between program specialists in terms of direction and guidance related to special education policies and procedures.
- In one competitive high school, 25% of the co-lab classrooms observed had two teachers present in the room while the remaining had one teacher present for the 15-20 minutes of observation time. Furthermore, teachers in this school tended to struggle more with managing student behaviors during lessons, routines, and transitions (both in and out of class).
- Some psychologists and teachers reported that at many schools, the perception of SWD are "those are YOUR kids." This perception can carry over into both instruction and culture and climate of the schools.
- In regard to the culture and climate of the schools, there are some disparate beliefs between teachers, psychologists, and parents. While we are certain that we interviewed and surveyed many individuals who are committed to the program, are advocates for SWD, and want to change the lives of students, we also heard from individuals who view special education from more of a "deficit model," such as referring to students as "low level" and not using person-first language.

## In Their Own Voices

In reviewing the data collected, the following quotes best support culture and climate.

*We need to set high standards both for what kids should learn and how well they should learn it in our schools. We need to systematically instruct all students in that content toward those achievement targets. And, we have to hold the adults in the systems accountable for that to happen.*

*The SDC students coming in are extremely low academically, it is a challenge for them to understand the grade level curriculum.*

*General Education teachers need to understand that special education students are their students that belong on each campus and in their classrooms. It is not an option for the GE teachers to have or not to have special education students at their sites or in their classrooms. Special Education teachers need built in time to collaborate with their Special Education peers as well as with those they co-teach with in the general education setting.*

*We need a vocational program for students who have low IQs and low academic ability. Many of these students struggle with GE curriculum since they have a large gap and the concepts in high school are too abstract for them. We are teaching above their level, their IEP goals are not attainable (within a year), and they leave high school with no skills to help them in their adult life. They need a program that will teach them life skills (i.e. money skills, social/job skills) and give them opportunities for low level jobs.*

*...We need more vocational training classes for a lot of our students. We are making our students take classes that are useless to them. For example, are very low (110-level) students are taking geometry or algebra II who are not academically ready to pass the classes independently.*

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## Why it Matters

High-performing schools have cultures characterized by high expectations, organizational intentionality, community engagement, teacher collaboration, and high degrees of “psychology of success” promoting practices.<sup>9</sup> These elements combine to form a school culture that is supportive, safe, caring, challenging, and participatory. A healthy culture also leads to improved school connectedness, learning engagement, attendance, classroom behavior, academic aspirations, and performance.<sup>10</sup> With leadership from program specialists, school teams can build an intentionally crafted, safe, positive, supportive, academically focused, and inclusive culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Shindler et al., 2009; Almanzan, 2005

<sup>10</sup> AIR 2007; Brand et al., 2003; Fleming et al., 2005; Libby 2004

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Learning environments that include all students being explicitly taught not just the skills of being a strong student, but the dispositions, habits, and traits that highly effective and successful adults possess facilitate and build student leadership and good decision making, as opposed to directive discipline that seeks compliance. The celebrations in the school include recognition of personal improvement and growth and are not just for top achievers. Adults and students alike should have trust in one another and work collaboratively to reach school and individual goals.

We found many teachers and staff who frame SWD in the affirmative. That is, they refer to SWD using person-first language, focus on their strengths, and live “inclusion” to the letter and spirit of the law. Those are the professionals that the District can request to engage in teacher-led groups and discussions. These teachers and staff typically send messages to colleagues that all students contribute to the positive culture of the classroom, and they give students the freedom to stretch themselves, make mistakes, and try again. Only in growth reinforcing cultures, where teachers and administrators are developed and encouraged to safely fulfill their own potential, will professionals then be able to help their students thrive in bias-free environments.<sup>11</sup> These complex systems do not develop overnight; they are shaped by the ways principals, teachers, and other key people reinforce, nurture, or transform underlying norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions.

The research on the efficacy of the co-teaching model at the secondary level is promising if the model is implemented correctly.<sup>12</sup> The University of Kansas identifies elements for effective implementation of co-teaching that include common planning that focuses on creating a lesson for the entire class rather than individual students and then incorporates what individual students may need into the plan. Attention to staff disposition prior to starting the co-teaching process was identified as element needed for effective co-teaching. Potential partners should discuss perspectives on issues such as fairness, grading, behavior management, and philosophy to become an effective team. Self-evaluation was also noted; if teachers are working in a team setting they should set aside time to discuss two critical questions, “Is how we are co-teaching meeting the needs of both teachers?” and, “Is what we are doing good for all students?” Issues will arise when implementing a co-teaching model and this does not necessarily indicate that co-teaching should not continue, rather it indicates that accommodations and adjustments should be expected elements of developing an effective co-teaching process

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<sup>11</sup> Dweck, 2010

<sup>12</sup> Idol, 2006; Mastropiere et. al 2005

## Recommendations

The following recommendations address culture and climate across school sites.

**Recommendation 1:** One overriding recommendation is for the District to examine the differences in attitudes toward SWD across school sites to address the beliefs that special education seen as a separate program that is “someone else’s” responsibility. Engage both program specialists and psychologists in leading groups in a discussion regarding the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders about schooling in general and SWD in particular. The groups should lead to the exploration of attitudes, development of common norms for supporting students, and focus on implementing bias-free, positive program culture.

**Recommendation 2:** Provide intentional and specific professional development on content and topics related to supporting SWD in the classroom, and provide real-time, ongoing opportunities for practice so that teachers can build both their understanding and frame of reference for what an inclusive classroom means. Teachers who do not practice and build successful experiences in the classroom, will not have the opportunity to shift mindsets and thus, change their belief systems. We believe that implementing a culture change so that all staff are responsible for all students is critical to teachers feeling accountable for student learning. Newly acquired belief systems can develop and build a community of responsibility amongst special and general education teachers, and we have found that the one critical element that influences teachers' beliefs about inclusion is not research or regulations, but their direct (positive) experiences with inclusion.

**Recommendation 3:** Continue to promote distributed leadership experiences that are shared with administration. Teachers cannot be the only staff to support and hold colleagues accountable. At the same time, consider training for teacher leaders on how to promote positive problem solving, culture building, and conflict resolution with colleagues so that they have different experiences with each other. This action will strengthen the teacher leaders’ effectiveness. The goal is to Develop and build a culture of responsibility amongst special and general education teachers. The District currently has bright spots amongst co-lab teachers, and this is an ideal place to start. An ideal culture would be one that moves away from the current practice of treating interventions as a stepping stone to special education to a culture that responds in the affirmative about SWD.

## Conclusion

Some of the recommendations in this report will be relatively easy to implement, such as providing focused professional development by content and technical experts throughout the district. Other recommendations, such as developing and implementing an MTSS model require significant planning efforts between school sites and the District Office. We recommend that a District start by piloting new, but smaller strategies and approaches to see what impact the change will really have.

This report contains many recommendations, and it is certainly not possible to implement all of them within a short period of time. Instead, District staff should identify those recommendations that are seen to yield the greatest benefit, and then prioritize them, specifying who is responsible for implementing each item and the timeline for implementation, along with periodic review to ensure that progress is being made.

## Appendix A: Data Collection and Analysis

WestEd engaged in a multiple phase process from October 2017 through March 2018. The first phase included an in-depth pre-assessment meeting with stakeholders (district personnel) to reflect on and prioritize both strengths and areas of need related to the District’s special education program. The purpose of the preliminary meeting was two-fold: to allow stakeholders to collectively frame areas of focus and then use these findings to inform the data collection instruments. District administrators and WestEd team members jointly developed the purpose and plan for the study.

The second phase, the data collection process, included a mixed-methods data collection approach in order to better understand the special education delivery system in the District (see Appendix A for interview, focus group, and online survey protocols). Data collection activities included:

5. Classroom observations at seven schools (Alpha ES, Lincoln ES, Pershing ES, Sierra Vista ES, MLK ES, Madera HS and Madera South HS) over a three-day period – designed to observe the student-to-adult ratio, the instructional activity, and the services provided;
6. Interviews with special education teachers (30-45 minutes) – designed to elicit teachers’ perceptions and perspectives on the special education program in the District and the implementation in their classrooms;
7. Focus group sessions with co-lab teachers, special education teachers and paraprofessionals– designed to obtain observations on school-level implementation;
8. Online survey for teachers and paraprofessionals – designed to capture perceptions and beliefs about the efficiency and effectiveness of the system from the point of view of the “user;”
9. Online survey for parents – designed to elicit perceptions and beliefs about the effectiveness of the system and culture and climate of the program, and
10. Financial records review of documents provided by the District and those available on the website – used to compared the district budget and special education budget over time (2013-14 to 2016-17).

Frequencies for each data collection activity are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1. Response by Data Collection Type**

Data Collection Type	Number of Participants
Classroom Observations	18
Co-lab Interviews	8
Teacher Interviews	22
Focus Groups (5)	33
Online Teacher Surveys	120
Parent Surveys	109





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