

Special Education in California Schools: The Challenges and Solutions from Multiple Perspectives

Sherrie Reed

California has seen recent policy changes, including the adoption of new standards, revised funding formulas and updated accountability mechanisms, all aimed at increasing equity and improving student outcomes. Yet, challenges in serving students with disabilities persist for many school districts. Solutions to these challenges compel additional policy action including increased funding, modified governance and accountability structures, and expanded teacher preparation and training. Meanwhile, district leaders, school administrators, and classroom teachers are finding ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the current policy context. This brief highlights the encouraging endeavors of several public school districts and charter schools in the area of special education.



California's new accountability and continuous improvement framework relies on district and school leaders using multiple measures of school performance to identify where change is needed, and to monitor carefully the development, testing, and evaluation of improvement strategies over time. This process of continuous improvement requires that local leaders have access to research-based evidence and strategies that they can implement in their schools and opportunities to learn from one another about what works, under which conditions, and for which students. PACE's series of Continuous Improvement Briefs aims to support education leaders at all levels in learning how to improve the performance of their schools and students.

Recent reports released as part of *Getting Down to Facts II* highlighted persistent challenges in special education funding, governance, and accountability in the state of California. At PACE's annual conference in January 2018, a panel of scholars, policymakers, and educators echoed these concerns about persistent challenges of funding shortfalls, cost of services, teacher preparation, and diverse student needs, and shared their insights on potential solutions at the state and local levels. While there are considerable challenges to be addressed by state policy, districts and schools across the state are effectively meeting the needs of their students with disabilities through innovations in budgeting practices, comprehensive teacher support, and a culture of inclusion. Drawing on the expertise and experiences of scholars and educators alike, this brief details the shared concerns and the potential solutions in both policy and practice.

Perspectives Reflected in this Brief



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Eric and Nancy Wright Professor of Clinical Education;
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Stanford Law School



Lauren Lindstrom

Dean,
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Kristin Wright

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Michele Bowers

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Carolyn Schwartzbord

Director of Special Education,
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Ana Ponce

Chief Executive Officer,
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Abundant Challenges in Special Education

School districts across the state face mounting challenges in the area of special education. Perhaps most importantly, special education funding has not kept pace with the increasing number of students eligible for services, nor does it adequately cover the rising costs of services.¹ Related, a statewide teacher shortage contributes to insufficient and underqualified staffing in special education programs.² Moreover, district leaders indicate that teacher preparation and training do not support general education teachers for classroom inclusion and integrated services for students with disabilities. Finally, governance of special education through local Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA), along with federal and state accountability mechanisms, are not necessarily designed with the transparency and local control principles of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and do not account for the complexity of measuring progress for students with disabilities.¹³ In combination, these challenges lead to segregation and fragmented services for students with disabilities.

Inadequate Funding

As with many areas of education, special education programming suffers due to insufficient funding. Federal and state funding is not based on the specific needs of learners, the community served, or the supports provided to students. Rather, the supplemental funding, distributed through SELPAs, is based on average daily attendance (ADA) of all students (inclusive of both general education and special education students) in member districts. Special education funding, however, is not equitably distributed; without apparent or explicit reason some SELPAs receive higher funding per pupil than others.⁴ Moreover, special education funding has stayed stagnant in the last decade despite inflation, increasing costs of services, and growing number of students eligible for services.⁵ These supplemental funds rarely cover costs of serving students with disabilities, nor do they account for services provided for preschoolers with disabilities. As such, school district leaders report using general funds to support special education services.⁶

“ More than 25 years in education. Do I ever feel that we have enough funding for the special education students? No, I’ve never seen it happen.”

CHIEF BUSINESS OFFICER,
AS QUOTED IN WILLIS, KRAUSEN, BYUN, & CAPARAS (2018)

Governance and Accountability

Compounding the lack of available funds is the manner in which special education resources are distributed across the state and how schools are held accountable for resource allocation and student performance. SELPAs distribute both funds and services for member districts based on needs and priorities determined by the SELPA governing board, rather than the local districts. These spending decisions do not necessarily consider stakeholder input and may not be as transparent as those made by a district—two important principles under the LCFF.⁷ Despite the fact that SELPAs allocate resources, they are not held accountable for student performance; schools and districts that do not determine the level and frequency of services provided are responsible for student performance under current accountability frameworks, which fail to accommodate the unique needs of students with disabilities (i.e., additional time needed to reach an outcome such as graduation or ability to earn certificate of attendance rather than a diploma) or to account for the complexity of measuring progress for students with disabilities (i.e., the range of abilities and the timing of eligibility for services).

Teacher Development

While many school and district leaders share policy concerns related to funding, governance, and accountability, they are also focused on matters of daily practice. District and school leaders suggest teacher training and support may be the greatest areas of concern within special education. First, not enough teacher candidates pursue credentials in special education. Additionally, teacher education programs separate general education and special education teacher candidates in specialized programs. Finally, general education teachers often do not receive adequate training on how best to serve students with special needs in an inclusive setting, despite the evidence that inclusion benefits all students.⁸ This likely promotes the identities that teachers adopt: elementary generalists, secondary content experts, and special education specialists. Disparate identities are also upheld by professional development and mentoring

programs that separate general education and special education teachers.

Fragmented Services and Segregated Classrooms

The disparate teacher identities, combined with the distribution of services by the SELPA rather than the local school, often lead to educational segregation and fragmented services for students. For instance, services for students with disabilities may be clustered in particular schools resulting in some students attending a school other than their neighborhood school. Within schools, students with disabilities may receive services and instruction in a separate classroom for all or part of the day. These segregated environments often conflict with policies mandating least restrictive environments and encouraging fully inclusive settings.

Potential Solutions in Policy: Updated Funding, Governance, Accountability and Credentialing

Understanding the challenges faced by districts across the state and their students, education leaders, scholars, and advocates recommend key policy reforms in the areas of finance, governance, accountability, and teacher credentialing.

Increased Funding

Within education circles, consensus exists on the need for increased funding, as current levels are not adequate for serving students with disabilities. Some advocates recommend updating special education funding formulas to ensure that special education funding keeps pace with LCFF base funding and recommend equalizing funding so that all SELPAs receive the same per pupil rate.⁹ Chief Business Officers interviewed by Willis et al. (2018) and district leaders on the 2018 PACE Annual Conference panel implore policymakers to account for the increasing number of students eligible for services, including preschool students, in their funding allocations.

Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA)

In California, special education services are managed by Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA). Beginning in 1977, all public school districts and county offices were required to form regional consortiums to provide for the needs of students with disabilities residing within the geographic boundary of the SELPA. Each SELPA develops a plan describing the provision of special education services. SELPAs receive and distribute special education funds for member districts based on needs and priorities determined by the SELPA governing board.

“ Providing quality education for students with disabilities is doable—difficult and costly—but doable.”

WILLIAM KOSKI, LAW PROFESSOR,
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Updated Accountability Metrics

Citing the unique requirements of measuring the performance and progress of students with disabilities, scholars, policy advocates, and district leaders agree on the need for updated accountability metrics. First, accountability frameworks must account for the range of abilities represented in subgroups and the year-to-year change in students included in subgroups. Changes in the students included in a subgroup are of particular importance for students with disabilities because higher performing students may no longer be eligible for services and therefore exit the subgroup. Educators often suggest the use of individual growth measures, rather than annual achievement, in accountability metrics, as one way to avoid the change in subgroup composition.

Second, accountability metrics should align with federal regulations that allow special education students to receive services until the age of 22. For example, one panelist suggested the use of a five- or six-year cohort graduation metric for students with disabilities. For accountability purposes, graduation rates are calculated using a four-year cohort model and students with disabilities that remain in school until age 22 (as allowed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) are counted as dropouts. A five- or six-year graduation rate would accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, align with federal regulation, and give schools credit for successful student outcomes.

Universal Teacher Credentials

Finally, policy recommendations include reinventing teacher preparation programs and credentialing regulations. Acknowledging the critical teacher shortage, Lauren Lindstrom, Dean of the School of Education at University of California, Davis, suggested the possibility of a universal teacher credential, rather than separate credentials for general education and special education teachers. This would allow teachers to serve in roles based on local district needs. Moreover, universal credentialing would promote inclusion and integration within schools.

Potential Solutions in Practice: Intentional Integration and Inclusion

While policy reforms could certainly increase funding, update accountability mechanisms, and reinvent teacher credentialing, district and school leaders, as well as classroom teachers, know that many workable solutions stem from practice. Educators across California have found ways to work within funding constraints and focus on teacher development, student support, and a culture of inclusion.

Creative Budgeting

To address funding shortfalls, districts are reserving dollars from general funds for special education costs. Chief Business Officers report setting up contingency funds for unexpected special education costs.¹⁰ Acknowledging concerns related to the cost of litigation associated with special education, one conference panelist advises finding alternatives for dispute resolution, such as mediation, to lower costs. Additionally, for some districts and schools such as Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, SELPAs serve as a resource for funding challenges in special education, as they provide a means for cost-sharing and create economies of scale.

Integrated Teacher Development

The district leaders on the conference panel focus intently on the integration of general education and special education teacher development and support, reinforcing the belief that all students should be served by all teachers. District leaders suggest that teacher preparation programs should be redesigned. One district leader proposed a universal teaching credential, where all teachers learn that instructional strategies for students with disabilities, historically viewed as interventions, are best practices for all students. Correspondingly, district leaders submit that professional development should not segregate general education and special education, but rather include all teachers in learning about important behavior and academic interventions. Integration of preparation and training throughout the professional journey will likely lead to less disparate views of teacher roles.

“ They are all our kids, they are all our work.”

MICHELE BOWERS, SUPERINTENDENT OF LANCASTER SCHOOL DISTRICT, ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATED TEACHING AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS.

Support for Teachers and Students

When teachers view their roles as more collaborative, students with disabilities are able to be fully included in general education. Yet, successful inclusion demands robust supports for teachers and students. According to district leaders, these supports include behavior specialists to intervene with student disruptions and mental health services for students experiencing trauma. Supports for teachers also include a schedule that accommodates common planning time, inclusive of special education and general education teachers, and mentoring from peer teachers and district specialists.

Administrative Priorities

In addition to the need for teacher supports, full inclusion requires attention to administrative factors such as the design of the master schedule. Lancaster School District builds a master class schedule by considering the needs of students with disabilities first, in order to prioritize and facilitate inclusion. District leaders also counsel staff to convene meetings to address student needs and goals whenever necessary, and not necessarily on the strict timeline detailed in special education regulations.

Conclusion

In special education, the funding, governance, and staffing challenges occur as a result of systemic underpinnings, historical ways of educating students, and personal views of educators. This does not mean, however, the current state is the way things ought to work. Rather, changes in policy and practice are likely to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities. Among the most important reforms may be the adoption of integration and inclusion as key principles in policy and practice. As suggested by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, the integration of funding and governance mechanisms may allow districts and SELPAs to work more collaboratively and with further transparency. The integration of general education

and special education credentials, teacher preparation programs, and ongoing professional development may lead to more support for inclusive classrooms. In turn, integrated and inclusive classrooms may cost less money, easing pressure to increase funding, and lead to improved outcomes, relieving concerns about accountability. At the very least, but with our greatest hopes, integrated and inclusive classrooms will better serve *all* of our students, those with disabilities and those without.

¹ Hill, L., Warren, P., Murphy, P., Ugo, I., & Pathak, A. (2016, November). *Special education finance in California*. Public Policy Institute of California.

Warren, P., & Hill, L. (2018, September). Revisiting finance and governance issues in special education. *Getting Down to Facts II Technical Report*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

Wright, K., & Duncan-Becerril, S. (2016). *Annual performance report: Federal fiscal year 2016*. California Department of Education, Special Education Division. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

² Carver-Thomas, D. & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Addressing California's growing teacher shortage: 2017 update*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Darling-Hammond, L., Goldhaber, D., Strunk, K., & Sutchter, L. (2018). Teacher supply falls short of demand in high-need fields, location. *Getting Down to Facts II Research Brief*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

³ Warren & Hill, 2018.

⁴ Hill et al., 2016; Warren & Hill, 2018.

⁵ Fensterwald, J. (2018). *Special education funding is a morass: Straightening it out may not be cheap or easy*. Oakland, CA: EdSource. Hill et al., 2016; Warren & Hill, 2018; Wright & Duncan-Becerril, 2016.

⁶ Willis, J., Krausen, K., Byun, E., & Caparas, R. (2018, September). In the era of the Local Control Funding Formula: The shifting role of California's chief business officers. *Getting Down to Facts II Technical Report*. Policy Analysis for California Education, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California.

⁷ Warren & Hill, 2018.

⁸ Salend, S. J., & Garrick Duhaney, L. M. (1999). The impact of inclusion on students with and without disabilities and their educators. *Remedial and special education*, 20(2), 114–126.

⁹ Hill et al., 2016; Warren & Hill, 2018.

¹⁰ Willis et al., 2018.

About the Author

Sherrie Reed serves as Executive Director for California Education Lab located in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. Her research interests include education policy, specifically accountability, charter schools, school finance, college readiness, and career technical education. Prior to her role with UC Davis, Reed worked in K-12 education as a special education teacher, administrator and charter school developer for over 20 years.

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

Related Publications

Linda Darling-Hammond, Dan Goldhaber, Katharine O. Strunk, & Leib Sutcher. **Teacher Supply Falls Short of Demand in High-Need Fields, Locations.** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Paul Warren & Laura Hill. **Revisiting Finance and Governance Issues in Special Education.** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Jennifer Imazeki, Paul Bruno, Jesse Levin, Iliana Brodziak de los Reyes, & Drew Atchison. **Working Toward K-12 Funding Adequacy: California's Current Policies and Funding Levels.** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.

Randall Reback. **Investments in Students' Physical and Mental Health in California's Public Schools.** *Getting Down to Facts II*. 2018.



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