

# Reef-Sunset Unified School District Special Education Review

Final Report

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# Executive Summary

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

## Evaluation Notes

**Why:** This evaluation examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the Reef-Sunset Unified School District's (RSUSD) special education program.

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

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

**When:** The majority of the review took place from August 2022 through December 2022.

## Introduction

Reef-Sunset Unified School District (RSUSD) is a preK–12 public school district that covers a portion of Kings County in the foothills of the western San Joaquin Valley. The District currently services two communities, Avenal and Kettleman City which are 17 miles apart. RSUSD provides a variety of educational programs to approximately 2,700 students in grades TK-12, at nine school sites and campuses including: three neighborhood elementary

schools, one K-8 school; one middle school, one comprehensive high school, and one adult school school.

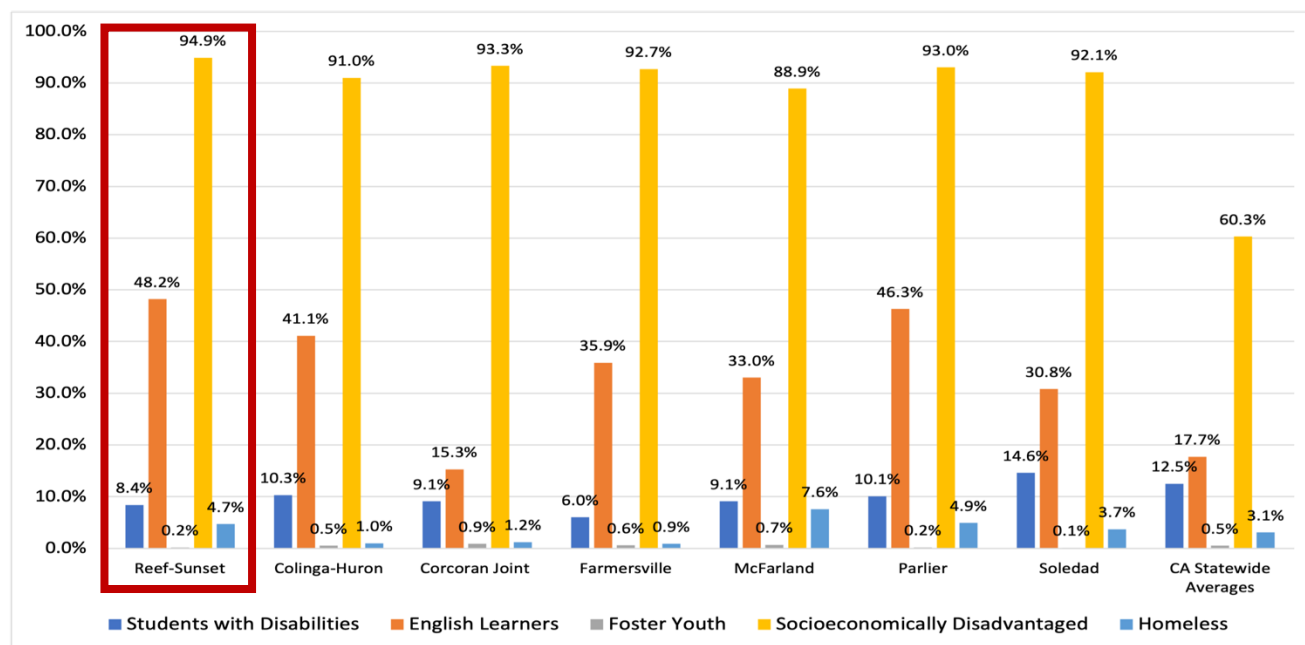
RSUSD partnered with WestEd to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the district's special education programs and services. The district's goal for this study was to understand the current level of success of the district's special education program and to identify overall programmatic and organizational improvements for increasing progress for students with disabilities efficiently and effectively. WestEd's approach to reviewing the RSUSD 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 RSUSD with an objective analysis and a set of recommendations that can be used to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its special education program while also honoring the strengths of the district's current structure and approach. The recommendations are intended to be used as a catalyst for dialogue and collaboration within the district as a means of charting a course for effective, efficient, and inclusive programs and services for all students with disabilities.

The WestEd team reviewed multiple data sources across RSUSD to provide an overall context for the analysis and an understanding of the workings of the district. Data was collected and analyzed from stakeholder focus groups, surveys, interviews, school observations, and reviews of IEPs. RSUSD also provided data, policy and procedural documents, and district-level plans and initiatives, all of which were reviewed for consistent application across the district.

In addition, WestEd worked with RSUSD to choose peer districts with similar demographics in order to compare statewide and regional data, highlight any structures or processes used by the districts that may positively impact their results with students with disabilities, and inform RSUSD's structures and processes. Six peer districts were selected: Coalinga-Huron Unified (CHUSD), Corcoran Joint Unified (CJUSD), Farmersville Unified (FUSD), McFarland Unified (MUSD), and Parlier Unified (PUSD). The peer districts were selected due to similar demographics to RSUSD and/or were selected as neighboring districts to RSUSD. These peer districts are discussed in detail in Theme 1 and are used throughout the report as examples of how students with disabilities are performing in districts with similar demographics. Figure 1 highlights the demographics of the peer districts and RSUSD.

Figure 1. Percentage of Subgroup Demographics of Peer Districts FY 2022



Source: California Department of Education Dashboard 2022: <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years has caused unprecedented disruption and changes in our education system across the county. The sudden shift to online instruction, ever changing and evolving mandates, staffing shortages, and changes in student enrollment, to name a few, have caused an interruption in our educational system and has impacted our traditional processes and cycles. These issues will be noted where appropriate in this report, but the scope of the report will examine the system prior to the pandemic, as well, in order to provide an overall view of where the system was heading and where it needs to evolve to address the current situation.

It is important to note that there are many assets and positive structures within RSUSD that the district is responsible for creating, implementing, and maintaining; and we witnessed these assets and structures as evidenced in our analysis. Overall, we observed that RSUSD's special education program is competently run by staff dedicated to ensuring the program is compliant, cost-conscious, and of high quality. The style and structure used to manage the special education program has its strengths and areas in need of improvement. **So, although 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 RSUSD's strengths.**

## Methodology

### *Online Surveys for Staff, Administration, and Parents*

Online surveys were created and implemented to provide school staff, school administration, and parents an opportunity to contribute their perspectives on relevant areas of inquiry. Surveyed groups included school administrators, special education leaders, special education teachers, special education providers of related services (e.g., speech-language pathologists, psychologists, etc.), general education teachers, instructional aides, and parents/family members. There were three different surveys: one for staff working on a school site, one for central office administrators at the district level, and two for parents of students receiving special education services in English and Spanish. The number of respondents for each of the surveys included:

- School site staff – 56
- Parents of students receiving special education services – 8
- Spanish speaking parents of students receiving special education services – 4
- Central Office administrators –3

### *Extant Data*

The following data was collected from data provided by RSUSD and from the websites of the California Department of Education (CDE), and peer districts:

- Student demographic, enrollment, attendance, and achievement data
- Educational environments (LRE settings) of students with disabilities and the percentage of time students with IEPs have access to general education settings
- Existing data (rates of graduation and postsecondary outcomes)
- Results of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and the California Alternate Assessment (CAA) in the areas of English language arts (ELA) and mathematics
- Special education student information data and forms accessed through the district's online Individualized Education Program (IEP) system
- Historical data in the form of prior reviews of the district
- Whenever possible, state, and local data from similar school districts in California. These school districts were identified by RSUSD as appropriate to use for comparison.
- District plans related to instructional programming, such as a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), special education services, and key initiatives
- State monitoring reports and supporting documentation



## Individualized Education Program Documentation

As part of the review, a sample of 20 IEPs for RSUSD were reviewed to assess whether they were reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit. This was defined in 1982 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Board of Education v. Rowley*, that an IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a child with disabilities to receive educational benefit. As free appropriate public education (FAPE) and the LRE became the guiding standard to ensure that children are afforded opportunities to benefit from education provided to them. In 2016, the Supreme Court expanded this standard and rule in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, that an IEP must be calculated to enable a child to make meaningful progress and that the IEP must require meaningful educational benefit. For an IEP to meet the standard of meaningful educational benefit, it must be a meaningful cohesive document that is utilized as an instructional framework and a guide for ensuring that the child is benefiting from the education provided.

The educational benefit review process is different from a compliance review. A compliance review monitors for the inclusion of components of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the IEP; an educational benefit review looks for interconnectedness of the components. The main components to determine educational benefit were:

- Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance, to include the impact of the disability on the ability to access the general curriculum
- Measurable Goals
- Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) or Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) as it is more frequently referred to in California, which defines how the student's specific unique needs resulting from the disability will be met
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – requirement found in the federal law Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers.
- Description of any Potential Harmful Effects which must be considered by the IEP team when deciding on placement options.

## Small Group and Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

In November and December of 2022, WestEd staff conducted a total of 12 individual and small group interviews, and 9 focus group interviews hearing from approximately 56 individuals from all stakeholder groups across special education, general education, site administrators, district administrators, and parent/family members.

## Data Analysis

The qualitative and quantitative analyses were checked using standard procedures such as cross-method and cross-information triangulation of discoveries, negative case analyses

(i.e., explicit search and explanation of discrepant information), the careful examination of records, and checking with select key partners to ensure the veracity of conclusions. A theming process was used to analyze the qualitative focus group data:

- Thematic content analysis procedures were used to identify significant statements (those that contributed to answering evaluation questions).
- Significant statements were tagged with the main point or meaning.
- Similar tags were grouped, creating codes.
- Codes were grouped by similar themes, which were then analyzed to inform the main discoveries for consideration.

Quantitative analyses were conducted on survey results and secondary data sources, such as student outcome data from CDE's website on accountability. Comparison groups and multiple reviews by WestEd staff were used to check the accuracy and reasonableness of the quantitative analysis.

For both qualitative and quantitative analysis, WestEd collaborated with district leaders to identify and talk through the meanings of the discoveries and to merge the quantitative and qualitative data to tell the full story of the evaluation.

The discoveries from the data collection process have been analyzed and cross-referenced to identify five key themes that arose across all the areas we explored. These key themes are summarized next, in the section, *What We Found: Five Themes*, and followed by a synopsis of the recommendations suggested under each theme.

The body of the report describes each theme in detail. The description of each theme includes four sections:

- Strengths: Existing areas within the District from which to build.
- Key Discoveries: Presents key data and discoveries under the theme.
- In Their Own Words: Features quotes that substantiate the discoveries. These quotes are taken from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys of administration, staff, and parents.
- Why It Matters: Describes why the theme and recommendations are important considerations for improving outcomes for students with disabilities as well as all students.
- Recommendations: Describes each recommendation in detail.

## Major Discoveries

Overall, our review found that the majority of staff and parents indicated that RSUSD is a well run district with strong and engaged leadership who prioritize students with disabilities and all students. District leadership was described by staff and families as responsive and supportive to the needs of all the students including students with disabilities.

Changes in the RSUSD enrollment rate for students with disabilities has increased at a significantly higher rate than the total student enrollment. Specifically, from FY 2019 through FY 2022 the district's overall **total enrollment increased** by 3.12% and the enrollment for **students with disabilities increased** at a significantly higher rate of 18.04%. (Figure 2).

This data point is important to monitor over the years to ensure that the District has **preventative interventions and supports** in place in general education to assist students who may need this assistance to experience advancement on state standards and their overall educational program. It will be important for RSUSD to review its special education referral practices to include and align with interventions, strategies, and assessments used in general education before a student is referred for special education. If pre-referral interventions and strategies are not utilized, then students may continue to experience a lack of an appropriate level of growth and success within the general education class causing the need for additional supports from special education which are often limited or only available in more restrictive programs. Preventative, early interventions, and supports under a systemic framework such as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), are often not in place in districts where there are high percentages of students with disabilities.

Overall, WestEd's data analysis shows that while there are many parts of the RSUSD program which are successful, there is also a need for a systematic plan for a coherent organizational structure, data collection, and fiscal collaboration. The discoveries in this report show that the district should consider staff and parent concerns regarding the structure of the district and where to access support. Additionally, the data reflects the need to maintain compliant IEPs and ensure that they are also written to be educationally beneficial for their students. We also found that the achievement gap between the students with disabilities and the students without disabilities for English Language Arts (ELA) averaged 18% points below the students without disabilities and was 10% points below in mathematics. This indicates that the students with disabilities are not succeeding at the same rate as their peers without disabilities. We also noted that all students, even the students without reported disabilities, were well below the statewide average. While the recommendations in this report focused on improving the outcomes for students with disabilities it should also result in improvement for all students in the district.

The data collected also shows a need for a common definition and understanding of what inclusion means or should mean in RSUSD. We found that while there is a deep belief in the

value of inclusive education, there is also a need to build the mindset that all students can learn when given the appropriate structures and supports.

Finally, RSUSD would benefit from more professional development around the areas of MTSS, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), instruction of dually identified, multilingual learners, inclusive models of instruction, and IDEA compliance for administrators. Working with staff to understand how these areas align with the mission, vision, values, and goals of the district and of the special education department would help with clarity and coherence within the system. These areas of need are supported by the discoveries in this report as well as research on student achievement.

## What We Found: Five Themes



### Theme 1: Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis

The District's student with disabilities (SWD) population growth has outpaced the growth for the enrollment of total students and the challenges that emerged due to the pandemic have impacted program size and structure.



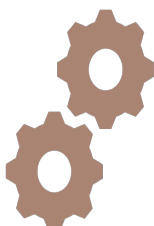
### Theme 2: Improving Systems Alignment and System Of Support

There is a need for an aligned system-wide, collaborative, and integrated instructional model of a tiered system of support that reflects a shared responsibility for learning and intervention for all students by special education and general education staff, families, and community partners.



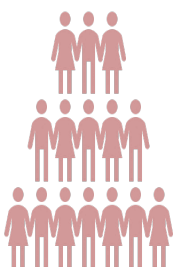
### Theme 3: Policy, Procedures, and Communication

RSUSD's special education department has developed structures and written policies and procedures but is lacking clear processes for communicating, implementing, and monitoring the use of these to guide consistency and efficiency in the provision of special education services.



### Theme 4: Increasing Access and Achievement

RSUSD has the opportunity to make systemic changes to allow students with disabilities improved access to inclusive environments in order to positively impact academic and social achievement by recognizing that students with disabilities have a place in the general education classroom. This process will be assisted by aligning the supports and services and building staff capacity to provide access and improved progress in the general environment and curriculum.



### Theme 5: Improving Equity, Climate, and Capacity

There is a continued need to provide school staff and administrators with collaborative, high-quality, system-wide professional development focused on optimizing the access and engagement that students with disabilities have to general education, through differentiating and accommodating instruction, and improving equity, behavioral, and social-emotional systematic instruction, and intervention.

## Recommendation Highlights

The following are summaries of the recommendations by theme. However, the themes and recommendations are interwoven across the system and as such, should be approached as part of a systematic plan for overall systemic improvements aligned with the District's mission, vision, values, and goals. To develop a long-term systemic plan for aligning and integrating the themes and processes, it is recommended that the District utilizes the MTSS teaming structures described under Theme 2 to align and prioritize the development of the overall district plan.

### *Theme 1: Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis*

RSUSD has experienced an increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities at a greater rate than the students without a reported disability. The increase is representative of the need for additional interventions and supports within general education to assist students when they begin to struggle. Pre-referral interventions were examined and it was determined that the process of identifying students for interventions and providing appropriate interventions within general education was not consistent across the district and were not rigorous enough to provide the supports needed for students to gain the necessary skills.

The Student Study Team (SST) process, which is a general education process that brings staff together to address students of concern and discuss possible program modifications within the general education class to address the concerns. It was also determined that the SST process in RSUSD, while it has been improving, was still inconsistently being utilized across the district. This data reinforces the need for implementation of the MTSS framework to systematically develop and align resources to address the needs of all students. Focusing on designing the system to focus on the **prevention** of school failure by providing interventions and supports within Tier 1 (general education classrooms) and designing more intensive supports as needed, based on accurate data, will provide the just in time support that is necessary for some students to experience success. To design the system to address the needs of the student population as it changes over time will require a system which includes the use of systematic ongoing processes for data collection, analysis, and accessibility across all areas including:

- Data on classroom and intervention tracking, demographic, and special education indicator data in order to guide decision-making for systemic improvements.
- Development of a transparent data collection, analysis, and accessibility plan that has protocols in place for district financial and achievement data with ongoing review and analysis by leadership teams.

The fiscal review indicated that there is a need for program leaders to communicate and work more closely with the Business Office in order to develop processes and procedures

for fiscal support and oversight. Adopting these procedures will assist administrators in planning for and appropriately using the funds available for their departments.

## *Theme 2: Improving Systems Alignment and System Of Support*

As stated above, processes and systems to support all learners, even those who are struggling, are inconsistently applied across the district. This data reinforces the need for implementation of the MTSS framework to systematically develop and align resources to address the needs of all students. Focusing on designing the system to focus on the prevention of school failure by providing interventions and supports within Tier 1 (general education classrooms) and designing more intensive supports as needed based on accurate data, will provide the just in time support that is often needed for students to experience success.

Implementing an effective system that focuses on prevention and intervention, can provide the needed supports to students when they begin to struggle, thus allowing the student a greater opportunity for success. Developing a consistent overall district vision, mission, values, and goals that are seen as the guiding star for the district which all staff, parents, and the community can align to will assist all in heading in the same direction.

When the data from this review is presented to staff and community collaborators, it will be an opportune time to engage in a review and revision of RSUSD's vision and mission. An updated vision and mission could create the need for an aligned system-wide, collaborative, and integrated instructional model of tiered systems of support that reflects a shared responsibility of learning and intervention for all students by special education and general education staff, families, and community partners. As RSUSD begins to build their MTSS framework, it will be important to re-engage and redesign their system and processes to align with the updated vision and mission.

As the RSUSD's MTSS process is being developed, it will be important to consider the following:

- Engage in design and implementation of MTSS by creating and assigning working teams to identify and clearly define each tier of the system.
  - This should identify specific interventions to be used within each tier, including entry and exit criteria, and data monitoring processes to ensure consistency of support across the district.
  - Within these tiered definitions, special considerations should be made related to the inclusivity and accessibility of Tier 1 instruction for all learners.
  - Staff from special education should be involved in all aspects of the design process, where expertise of diverse learning needs can be leveraged.
- Building staff capacity for developing a robust and flexible Tier 1 which is grounded in the principles of UDL will provide a solid foundation for the other tiers of support.

- Consider tasking the teams with defining and improving the pre-referral/referral process for special education in order to ensure alignment of this process under the MTSS framework, and consider developing accompanying policies and procedures in concert with the recommendations of this report.
- Lastly, evaluate the extent to which general education and special education teachers have the structured time and clearly defined processes necessary to create truly robust and research based inclusive general education settings.

### ***Theme 3: Implementing Policy, Procedures, and Processes***

RSUSD's special education department has begun to develop structures and written policies and procedures but is lacking clear processes for consistently training, implementing, and monitoring the use of these. RSUSD should consider creating a team to continue to develop, review, and revise as necessary the district's handbook for special education procedures to align with the MTSS framework and processes. This will include:

- The special education procedural handbook will provide clarity and guidance for administrators, teachers, paraeducators, parents, and students regarding the entire special education program.
- Begin by establishing a clear vision and mission for the special education services, which is aligned with the District's vision and mission and the MTSS processes along with the required special education processes will provide a common understanding of the purposes and goals of the special education program.
  - Doing this would address some of the concerns expressed by staff regarding a consistent direction and clarity of what is required to develop a program that is not only compliant but also produces educational benefit for the students with IEPs.
- Establish a communication plan for the department that emphasizes solid bi-directional feedback and input and disseminates information about the work of the department as it connects to RSUSD's mission, vision, values, and goals for students, staff, the community, and other stakeholders.
- Develop a process for reviewing and updating the procedural manual to update on an ongoing basis.

### ***Theme 4: Increasing Access and Achievement***

The data from this report shows, RSUSD's students with disabilities are in need of systemic changes to build a system which can support implementation of evidence-based strategies to improve the instructional design to increase their access and engagement in the lessons. These strategies will provide students with disabilities increased access to high-quality support in inclusive environments. These changes will positively impact academic and social achievement by aligning the supports and services to provide improved access and



engagement in the general environment and curriculum so students will experience greater success overall.

RSUSD should

- Develop common values and goals for building equitable and inclusive access to schools by encouraging a discussion regarding the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders about building equitable and inclusive classrooms.
  - Use the discussions to explore attitudes, develop common norms for supporting students, implement a bias-free, positive program culture, identify what's working and not working in collaborative structures between special education and general education staff, and look at the district's actual data related to its inclusion rate.
  - The desired outcome of such discussions would be to establish collective commitments that would guide inclusive goals and successful results for students with IEPs across the district.
  - Then develop a common definition across RSUSD of what it means to be an inclusive district.
- Build staff capacity to implement a more aligned and cohesive system focused on good first instruction in general education through the use of UDL Principles and specialized academic instruction in the inclusive classroom.
- Design staff support roles and services to accommodate the new structures.

### ***Theme 5: Improving Equity, Culture, and Climate***

Throughout these years of uncertainty, issues relating to the climate and culture of the district have increased dramatically. Staff, student, and family mental health and wellness has struggled and the need for new ways to provide support in the areas of social/emotional and mental health has never been more necessary. It will be important for the District to build new structures and vehicles for providing these supports on a continuing basis.

There is also a continued need to provide school staff and administration with collaborative, high-quality, system wide professional development focused on optimizing the access and engagement that students with IEPs have to general education.

The emphasis of the professional development should include:

- Building staff capacity to provide differentiating and accommodating instruction and UDL lesson design
- Improving behavioral and social/emotional systematic instruction through the use of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) along with more intensive interventions in Tiers 2 and 3.
- Providing training and coaching to site leaders to help build their capacity to fulfill their role as a local educational agency (LEA) representative at an IEP meeting, take on more responsibility for this role, and create more clarity and consistency across the district.
- District should provide an improved process for mentorship and coaching for the first two years of a new special education teacher's tenure and provide IEP support for new and veteran teachers who may need support.

## Theme 1: Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis

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The District's student with disabilities (SWD) population growth has outpaced the growth for the enrollment of total students and the challenges that emerged due to the pandemic have impacted program size and structure.

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### Key Discoveries

To support a continuous improvement process, RSUSD would benefit from increasing staff capacity in using data as part of a data-driven decision-making process. This includes a focus on collecting, analyzing, and problem solving in order to guide decision-making for systemic improvements as the data and Key Discoveries below indicate.

#### *Enrollment and Incidence of Disability*

- From FY 2019 to FY 2022, RSUSD's enrollment for students with disabilities averaged 221.6 students, or 8.2% of total enrollment. During this time, the cumulative increase in **enrollment of students with disabilities** was 18.04%, while the cumulative increase in **total district enrollment** was 3.12%. Most of the enrollment growth for the students with disabilities subgroup occurred in the 2018-19 school year. (Figure 2).
- From FYs 2019-22, RSUSD's student with disabilities as a percent of the total enrollment shows that RSUSD's enrollment from the FY 2018 to the FY 2019 school years has remained fairly flat with only an overall change of 0.3%. Many of the peer districts have seen greater increases and larger variance in the enrollment of their students with disabilities subgroup. (Figure 3).
- From FYs 2020-2023, the proportion of disability by incidence in RSUSD has varied very little. There has been a slight increase in the categories of autism of 1.4%, intellectual disabilities of 0.2%, other health impaired of 0.7%, and the "other" category of 0.4%. There have been larger decreases in the categories

of emotional disturbance of 1.3%, speech/language impairment of 3.8%, and specific learning disabilities of 4.4%. (Figure 4).

### *District Expenditures*

- The total cost of the Special Education Program has a cumulative increase in expenditures of approximately \$3.51 million between 2017-18 and 2020-21. (Figure 6).
- Certificated salary cost increased by \$1.12 million (24.8%) when comparing 2018-19 to 2022-23 but planned and classified salaries remained relatively flat over the same comparison with a \$ 0.17 million (2.5%) increase. Benefits increased by \$1.46 million (20.3%) during the same period. (Figure 7).
- The District ranks 6th in the comparison group for the percent of General Fund budget expended to support special education in 2020-21. (Figure 8).

### *Impact of the Pandemic*

- Student enrollment and absenteeism has fluctuated greatly.
- Student learning has been impacted and behavioral issues have increased due to stress, mental health needs, and loss of typical routine and structure.
- Staff physical and mental health issues and needs have increased due to challenges related to the pandemic.
- Staff burnout and stress levels are high.
- Recruiting and retaining staff has become a bit more difficult particularly in the areas of special education teachers, instructional aides, and related service personnel.

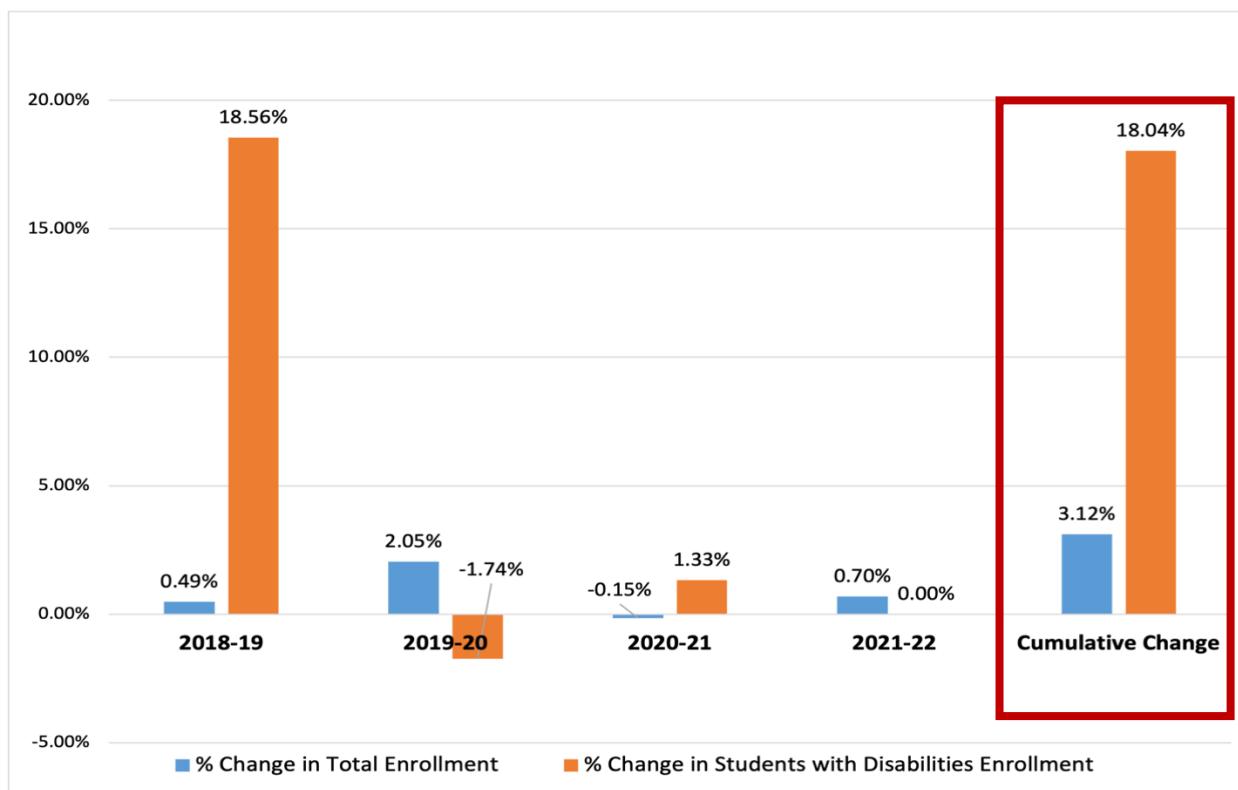
## Data Review and Analysis

The following data expands upon the Key Discoveries.

**Enrollment and Demographics.** The overall total enrollment of students in RSUSD has decreased over the last five years but the enrollment of students with IEPs has increased substantially.

Figure 2 represents the percent of cumulative change in the enrollment of students with disabilities compared to the total enrollment of the district. For the time period from FYs 2018-2021 the overall cumulative enrollment of the students with disabilities in RSUSD increased by 14.9% while the overall cumulative total enrollment decreased by 4.6%.

**Figure 2. RSUSD Percentage Change in Total Enrollment and in Enrollment of Students with Disabilities, FY 2018 through FY 2022**



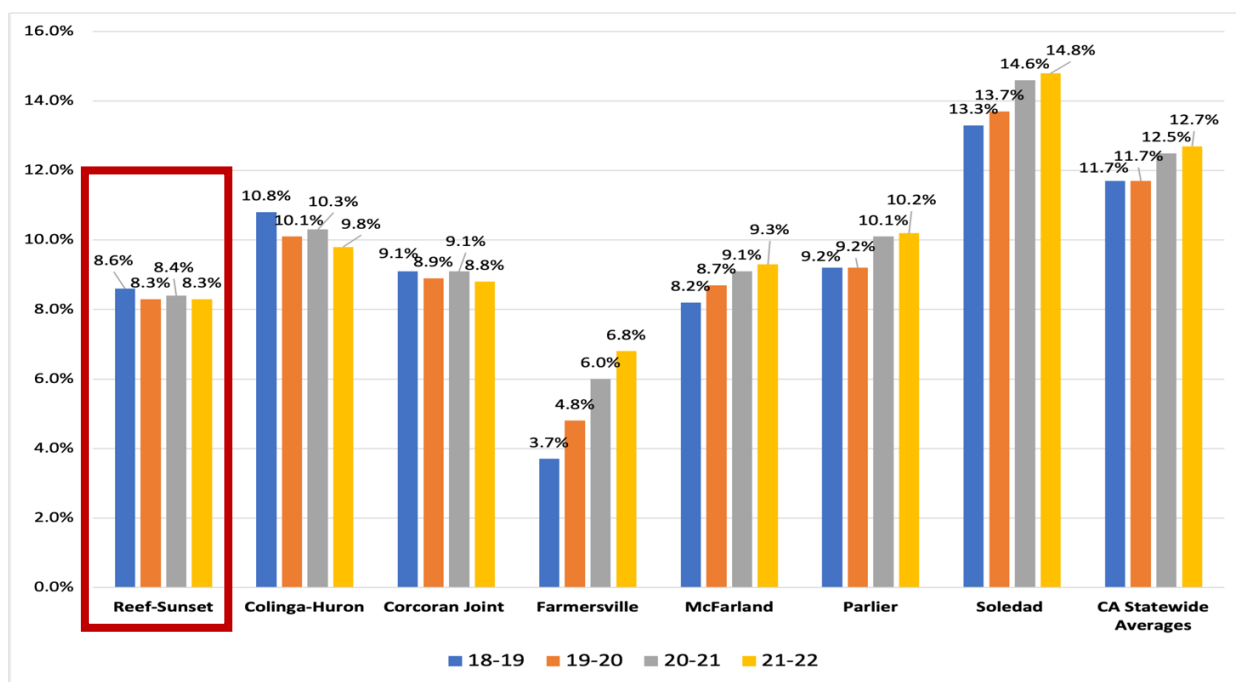
**Source:** California Department of Education Dashboard 2022: <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

In districts where the students with disabilities population is increasing at a higher rate than the overall student enrollment, it is important to find out the reason for the large increase in the students with disabilities subgroup. It is often found that there was

either a movement of students into the district or that few options exist for support for students who are experiencing challenges within general education and thus special education is seen as one of the only options for additional support. It appears in this case that there was a combination of both options during the 2018-19 school year.

Figure 3 shows the students with disabilities as a percentage of the total enrollment compared with the peer districts and the State of CA. When RSUSD's students with disabilities as a percent of the total enrollment is compared with other similar districts in California and the state as a whole, we see that RSUSD's enrollment since the increase from the 2017-18 to the 2018-19 school years has remained fairly flat with only an overall change of .3% while many of the peer district have seen increases and larger variance in their enrollment of their students with disabilities subgroup.

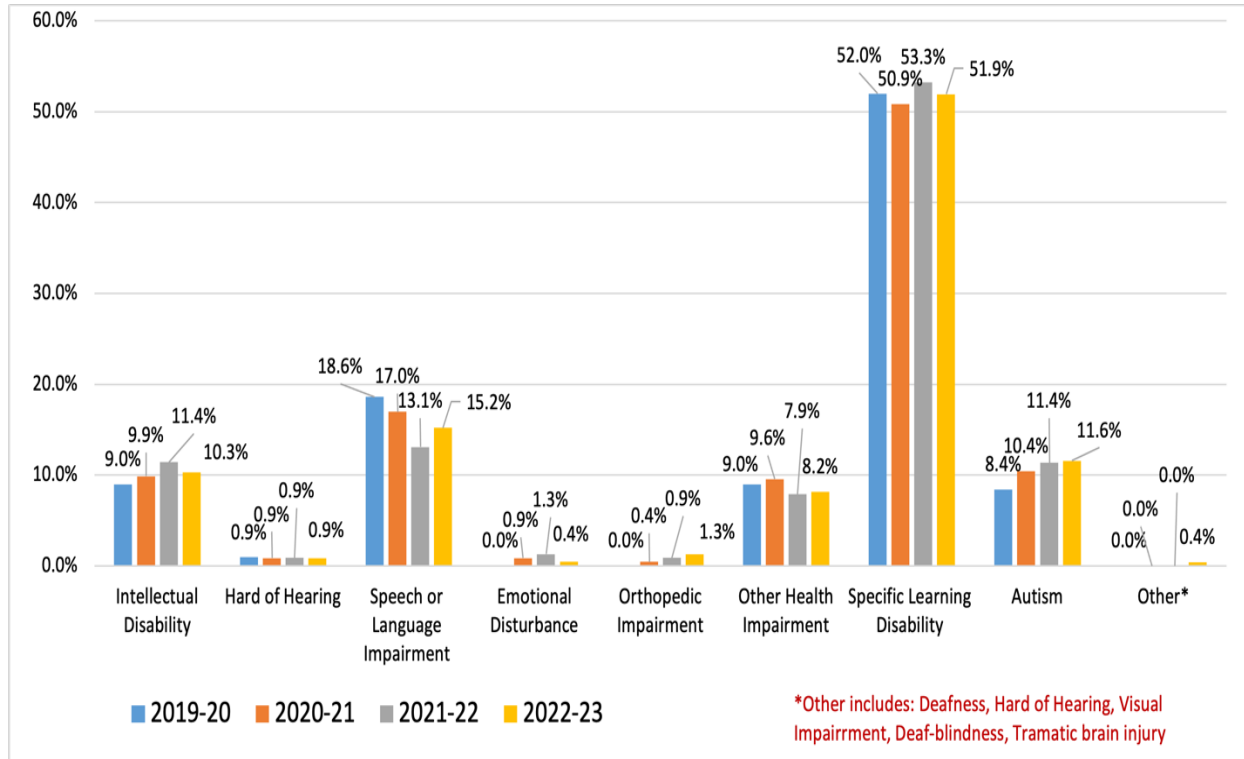
**Figure 3. RSUSD Students with Disabilities as a Percentage of Total Enrollment Compared with the Peer Districts in FYs 2020-2022**



Source: California Department of Education Dashboard 2022: <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

Figure 4 represents the proportion of disability incidence in RSUSD for FY 20-22. Over the years the categories have remained fairly constant with an overall increase in the categories of autism of 3.2% and intellectual disabilities of 2.4%, and a decrease in the category of speech or language impairment of 5.5%.

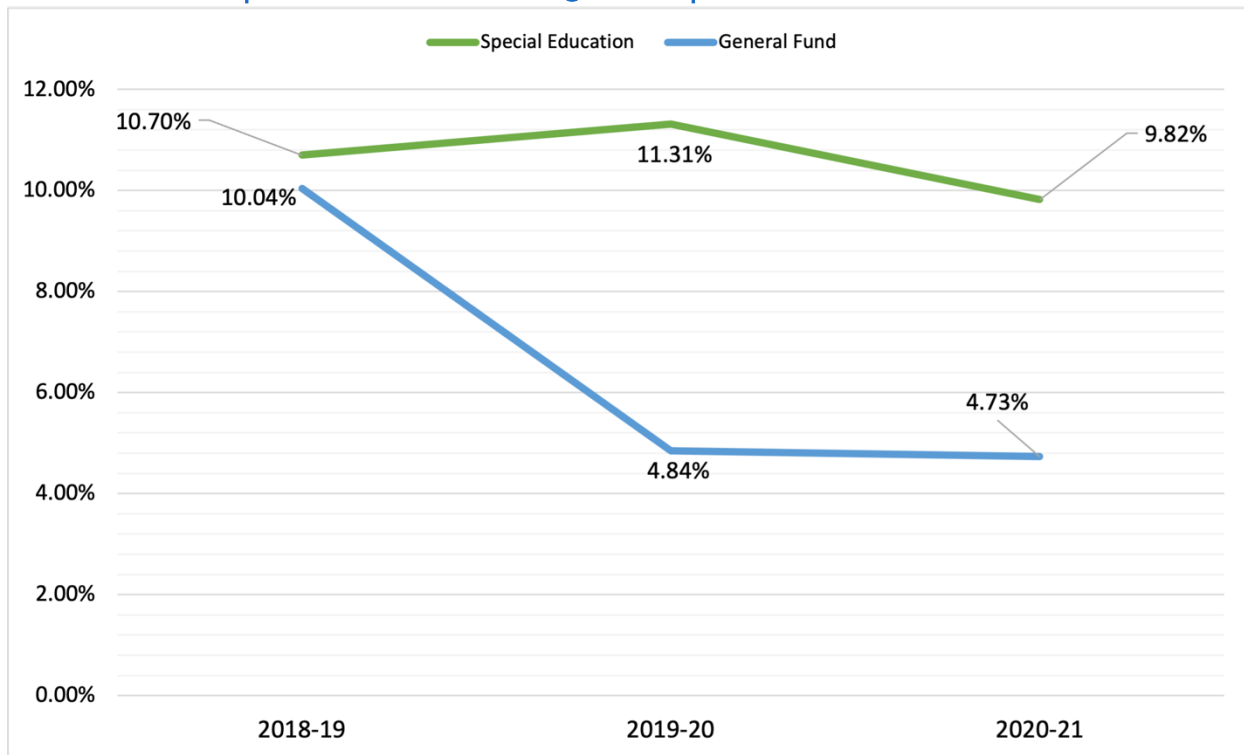
**Figure 4. RSUSD Percentage of Incidence of Disabilities in FYs 2020 through 2023**



Source: District Supplied Data

Figure 5 shows the comparison of year-over-year costs for RSUSD for FY 2019 to 2021. There was a decrease in the General Fund Expenditures (5.2%) from FY 2019 to FY 2020 but the Special Education expenditures showed a slight increase (.06%) but have stayed fairly flat in order to maintain the "Maintenance of Effort" (MOE) federal requirement. Unless there is a change in the special education program, it is typical that the special education expenditures do not decrease significantly as districts are required to maintain the current level of services to align with the MOE requirements.

Figure 5. Comparison of year-over-year cost for the RSUSD Combined General Fund and the Special Education Program Expenditures for FYs 19-21









Source: Ed-Data: <https://www.ed-data.org/> and District supplied data



Figure 6 shows the special education expenditures over time by type. The total cost of the Special Education Program has a cumulative increase in total expenditures of approximately \$3.51 million (10%) between FY2018 to FY2021.

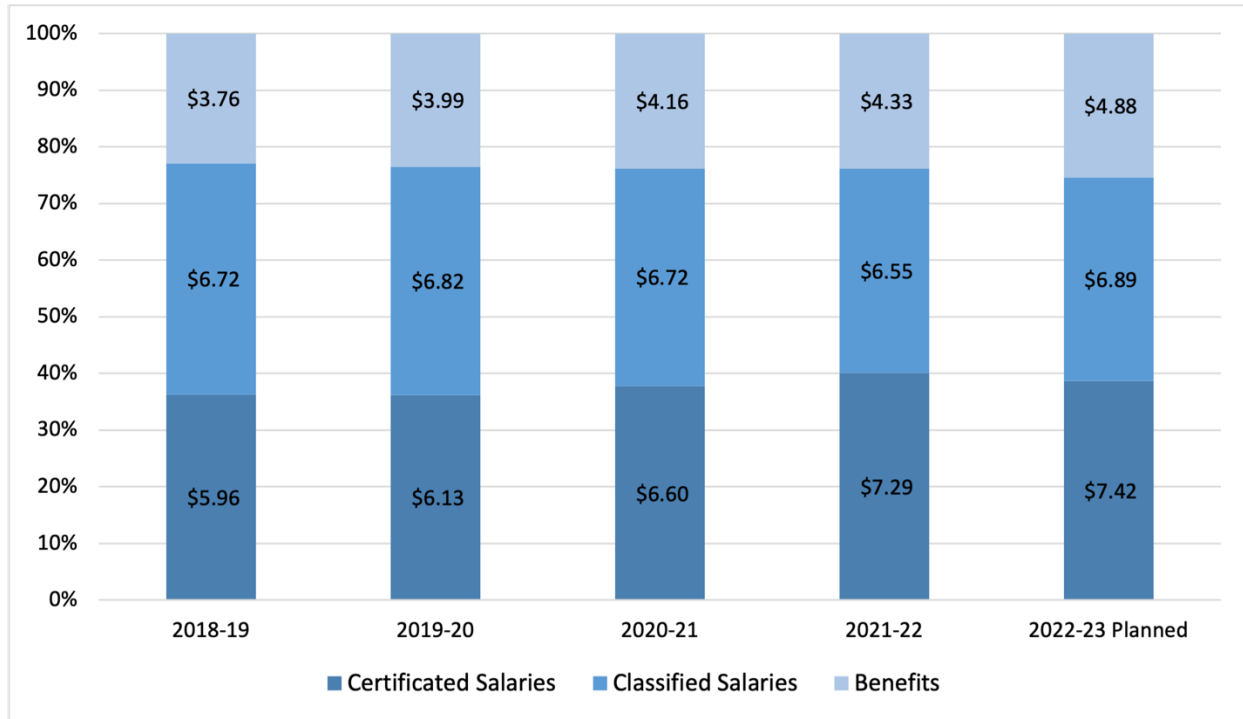
**Figure 6. RSUSD special education expenditures over time by type, SACS goal classification 5XXX unrestricted and restricted general fund**

Amount In Millions	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
 Staff Compensation Expense	\$24.34	\$13.01	\$13.55	\$113.52
 Services Expense	\$3.80	\$5.22	\$4.19	\$5.04
 Books, and Supplies Expense	\$3.18	\$2.73	\$2.29	\$2.34
 Equipment	\$0.22	\$1.07	\$0.47	\$0.07
 Other Outgo/Transfers Indirect Costs	\$0.40	\$0.51	\$0.56	\$0.97
 Total Program	\$31.93	\$35.54	\$35.36	\$35.44

Source: Ed-Data: <https://www.ed-data.org/> and District supplied data

Figure 7 represents RSUSD's special education expenditures for compensation in millions for the FYs 2019-2023. Certificated salary cost increased by \$1.12 million (2%) when comparing 2018-19 to 2022-23 (planned) and classified salaries remained relatively flat over the same comparison with a \$0.17 million (.01%) increase. Benefits increased over the time period by 1.12%

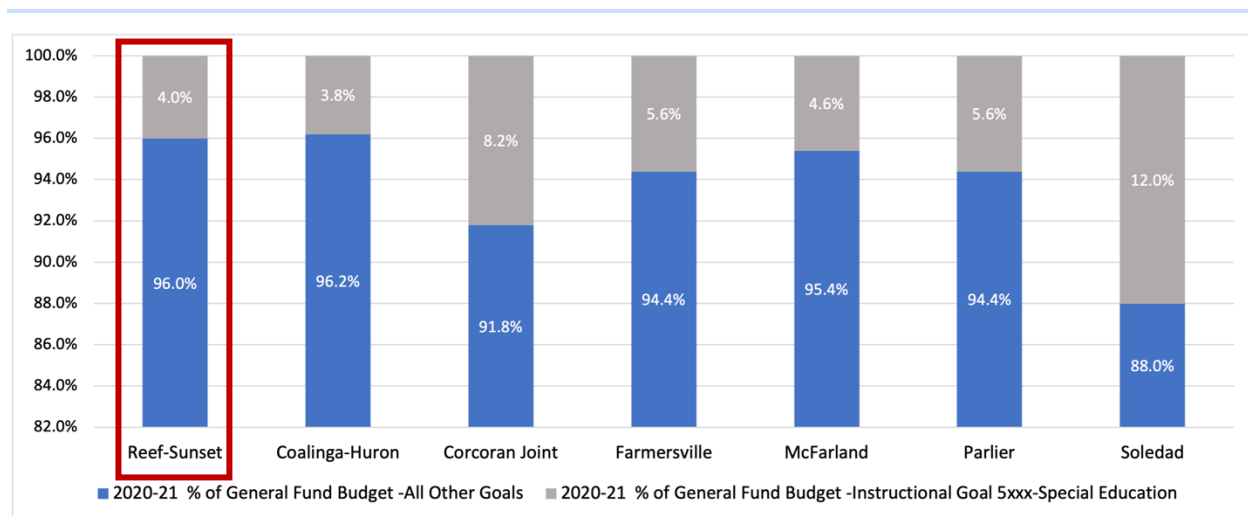
**Figure 7. RSUSD Special Education Expenditures for Compensation in millions FYs 2019-2023**



Source: Ed-Data: <https://www.ed-data.org/> and District supplied data

Figure 8 shows the percent of general fund and instructional goal 5xxx special education expenditures for FY 21 for RSUSD and the peer districts. RSUSD ranks second to the lowest in the peer group and just a bit higher than Coalinga-Huron, for the percent of General Fund budget expended to support special education in 2020-21.

**Figure 8. Percentage of General Fund and Instructional Goal 5xxx Special Education expenditures compared FY 21 for RSUSD and the peer districts.**



Source: Ed-Data: <http://www.ed-data.org/>

Data, processes and procedures were reviewed for fiscal support and oversight and it was found that there were few processes in place to assist administrators planning for and appropriately using the funds available for their departments. The following are examples of these issues:

- Effective process is not in place for communication between the business office and program directors to assist with the planning of special education program activities for a more effective and efficient implementation.
- An effective communication process is lacking between the Business Office, Special Education Department, and the Human Relations office which would connect the special education staffing needs with available funding and the associated requirements of that funding.
- The LCAP funding does not incorporate special education funding. This would connect potential available funding which is available to grow the program and address the needs of students with specific challenges.

Additional data throughout this report will indicate that issues of adequate staffing were frequently expressed by stakeholders. Comments from interviews, focus groups,

and surveys, from staff, and parents expressed concerns that the levels of staffing for special education was not sufficient. Teachers expressed concerns that the sizes of their caseloads and grade level spread made it difficult to provide the level of services to all students. Comments concerning staffing include:

- As in many districts across the country, instructional assistants have been stretched thin due to the departure of others and it has not always been easy to find new staff.
- New special education teachers and related service personnel are often difficult to find as there is a shortage in the field or these positions. Teachers (in both general and special education) and administrators expressed a desire to have staff who are fully certified and experienced. They also recommended having a better system to support new teachers.
- General education staff have expressed concern with the lack of availability of special education staff both for collaborating and planning for support for the students who are being included but also for providing timely responses to issues and needs of the students.
- Parents also expressed a desire for staff to assist students with transitions to new sites (i.e., from the elementary to middle school or middle to high school as it is difficult for students to feel safe and settled in their new environments.
- It is recommended that overall staffing changes be viewed as part of a thoughtful and thorough examination of structural changes that will occur as part of the systemic improvement process and be done in a planful way.

## In Their Own Voices

### Summary of feedback from focus groups, interviews, and surveys related to Theme 1:

Summary of feedback from **Staff**:

#### **Strengths:**

- *Special education staff work very hard to support student needs.*
- *All staff care deeply about their students.*

#### **Challenges**

- *There are not enough staff to meet the student needs.*
- *Some of our special education staff are not fully trained or experienced.*

Summary of feedback from **Parents:**

### Strengths

- *Children are making progress.*
- *The staff help me know more about my child.*

### Challenges

- *Need more staff to help our children learn.*

## Why It Matters

**Design and costs.** The cost of special education services is driven by factors that include, but are not limited to, the number of students, the way services are provided, the quality and responsiveness of such services to meet students' needs, and a district's systematic organization of instructional services and support staff.

Throughout the United States, special education programs are often cited as being costly but having varying degrees of reported impact and effectiveness. Districts that have been able to create highly effective special education programs have:

- put efficient processes in place,
- invested in building staff capacity to complete critical functions and offer high-quality activities,
- staffed at appropriate, cost-effective levels that are aligned with student needs, and
- routinely reviewed trends on the incidence of disability by type over time to find when the district may need to create or phase out programs and mitigate potential areas of over-identification.

**Best first instruction in the general curriculum.** Addressing challenges with the notion of "best first instruction in the general curriculum" will help remedy some of the problems that occur in special education: the over-identification of students in certain ethnic groups, the large numbers of students who might be given the "disability" label and the challenges schools face when their special education enrollments are high and funding for specialized supports and services is increasingly limited.<sup>1</sup>

Studies have found that the single most consistently significant predictor of academic achievement for students with disabilities, despite the local education agency, grade level, and content area, is the performance of general education students.<sup>2</sup> Successful

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<sup>1</sup> Balcom, F., 2011

<sup>2</sup> Malmgren, K., 2005

inclusion of the students with IEPs in the general education classroom also depends upon:

- Creating an optimal environment for best first teaching through implementing a district-wide MTSS model (Theme 2) which includes:
  - The supports and services being in place to provide access to the general education instruction through the use of appropriate accommodations and differentiation designed to address the learning needs of all the students in the classroom.
  - The use of the principles of UDL in developing lessons which are designed to provide options in how students engage with content, understand content through different representations, and show their understanding of content through multiple means of action and expression.
  - Use of these will empower special education service providers to have a rich learning environment with options and embedded supports to tie Specialized Academic Instructional strategies to in an inclusive and holistic way.
  - Additionally, these global instructional supports will contribute to all staff members and stakeholders having clarity and feeling of ownership, which will support the learning of all students and ultimately provide greater access for students with disabilities.

**Staffing costs.** As with most K–12 education, personnel comprises the majority of program expenditures. An important part of ensuring that special education services are cost-effective and of high quality is utilizing staffing ratios, performing routine reviews of staffing levels and assignments, and analyzing the effectiveness of position functions in terms of student needs.

**Enrollment.** The cost of special education services is driven by factors that include, but are not limited to:

- the number of students,
- the way services are provided,
- the quality and responsiveness of such services to meet students' needs, and
- the district's systematic organization of instructional services and support staff.

If the enrollment of students receiving special education services continues to increase and expenditures do not adjust in proportion with enrollment, there will continue to

be an imbalance between the increases in costs for the special education program compared with those for RSUSD's overall educational program. Growth in this imbalance will create budget tension over time.

**Data.** None of the recommendations proposed in this report can be achieved without data collection, analysis, and accessibility. For districts to make sound decisions, they must base those decisions on data that is collected and analyzed regularly. Additionally, data should be easily accessible to staff and the public at large. The transparency and accessibility of district data builds trust with stakeholders and leads to beneficial conversations that can improve student outcomes.

## Recommendations

*Recommendation 1: To assist with efficiency and appropriate use of funding, the District leadership should develop a collaborative process between the special education department, the business office, and human resources to ensure that collaboration and communication occur on budget and staffing needs on a routine basis. The focus will be to develop data-based procedures for analyzing the special education program expenditures to ensure that all available funds are appropriately utilized and to proactively manage its special education budget and annual MOE to ensure annual requirements are met.*

This collaboration should focus on:

- Development of information and training on requirements for available funding sources, guidance and support in decision making for program staff, and review of program data to maximize funding where it is needed and how it can be most effective.
- This will be especially important since pandemic related factors such as school closures and hybrid learning models may have had an impact on expenditure levels. For additional guidance on managing the Special Education MOE see the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team Fiscal Alert found here <https://www.fcmat.org/PublicationsReports/Fiscal-Alert-Special-Education-MOE-4-2021.pdf>

Additionally, federal relief and stimulus aid bills have provided a welcomed and vital resource to local education agencies to address the impacts of COVID-19 on students, families, and educators. The range of activities that can be supported by these funds is broad and while welcomed, these funds are one-time in nature and must be used over the course of the next two years. Therefore, careful planning and consideration of how best to leverage these funds to support student well-being and learning is called for in order to optimize positive systemic impacts for students.

*Recommendation 2: Annually review trends on the incidence of disabilities by type, to be proactive in determining what programs the district considers creating or phasing out, as well as mitigate the potential of over identification.*

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:

- Review the District's identification practices ensuring consistency across the District.
- Explore the variances between statewide and District incidence of disability rates, to ensure that current identification practices are not contributing to over identification of certain disabilities.

*Recommendation 3: Actively engage in proactively planning for staffing shortages and increasing retention of staff.*

The Learning Policy Institute and the Center for Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) have developed a [Solutions Toolkit for Teacher Shortages](#). In addition, the GTL Center has resources devoted to shortages in special education teachers. The [Analyzing Special Education Teacher Shortages: Data Tool for Practitioners](#) includes a tool for collecting and analyzing data along with strategies for remediating the issues. The GTL Center has also partnered with the CEEDAR Center to develop a policy brief on [Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions](#) and [Short-Term Strategies for Dealing With Shortages of Special Education Teachers](#)<sup>3</sup> which includes strategies that can be implemented at a district level.

## Resources for Theme 1

### Special Education MOE

- Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) Fiscal Alert found at: <https://www.fcmat.org/PublicationsReports/Fiscal-Alert-Special-Ed-MOE-4-2021.pdf>

### Data-Based Decision-Making

- National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII): <https://intensiveintervention.org/>
  - Funded by Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to provide resources, tools, and training on data-based instruction.

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<sup>3</sup> Kamman, M., 2019



- Tools Charts: <https://intensiveintervention.org/tools-charts/overview> NCII has developed six tools charts to assist educators and families in becoming informed consumers who can select academic and behavioral assessment tools and interventions that meet standards for technical rigor and address their specific needs.

### Recruitment and Retention

- Center for Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) have developed a
  - [Solutions Toolkit for Teacher Shortages](#).
  - In addition, the GTL Center has resources devoted to shortages in special education teachers. The [Analyzing Special Education Teacher Shortages: Data Tool for Practitioners](#) includes a tool for collecting and analyzing data along with strategies for remediating the issues.
- The GTL Center has also partnered with the CEEDAR Center to develop a policy brief on:
  - [Preparing and Retaining Effective Special Education Teachers: Short-Term Strategies for Long-Term Solutions](#) and
  - [Short-Term Strategies for Dealing With Shortages of Special Education Teachers](#).

## Theme 2: Improving Systems Alignment and System Of Support

There is a need for an aligned system-wide, collaborative, and integrated instructional model of a tiered system of support that reflects a shared responsibility for learning and intervention for all students by special education and general education staff, families, and community partners.

### Key Discoveries

#### *Systems Alignment*

- In focus groups, interviews, and surveys staff frequently mentioned that:
  - the various departments in the district operate in silos without much collaboration
  - staff appreciate the development of consistent policies and procedures but mentioned that the procedures are being applied inconsistently across the district

#### *Pre-Referral Interventions*

The following are responses from the surveys, interviews, and focus groups related to pre-referral interventions:

- On the surveys:
  - 43% of staff indicated that high-quality pre-referral interventions were not being provided by general education teachers for struggling learners.
  - 45% of the staff indicated that there is not an effective tiered intervention system in use at their school to support struggling learners.
  - Staff indicated that the pre-referral process was not timely (44%) nor efficient (45%) and that often the process was slow due to staffing and scheduling issues.
- Staff frequently reported that the pre-referral process and the referral process for special education was not viewed or aligned as part of the MTSS process for students who are struggling.

## MTSS

- In focus groups, staff indicated that:
  - Prior to the pandemic, RSUSD began the process of designing and implementing a district-wide MTSS process but that the implementation process has been interrupted due to the pandemic and is now being implemented inconsistently across the district.
  - There is an inconsistent process across the district for identifying, providing interventions, data collection, and progress monitoring for learners who are struggling in the general education classroom with both academic and behavioral challenges.
  - There is a need for additional professional development regarding MTSS that is defined and monitored for consistent application.
    - Staff also recognize the need for additional training and guidance in order to provide support and access for students with diverse needs in the general education classroom to allow for full access and engagement in lessons.

## Data Review and Analysis

The following data expands upon the Key Discoveries.

### MTSS

The District has articulated a clear vision for moving forward towards an equitable and inclusive system, which provides supports for all students, families, and staff to grow and progress to their greatest ability as is reflected in the District's vision and mission:

*The Mission of the Reef-Sunset Unified School District is to empower and inspire students for life-long learning and relational success in order to be productive members of society.*

In addition, the mission of the special education department of RSUSD is:

*Our Special Education Department ensures that a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is provided to all qualified students with disabilities. We collaborate with Special Education Teachers, General Education Teachers, Psychologists, Special Education Aides, and other Education Professionals in order to better serve our students.*

To align these various priorities, RSUSD began the process of building a system that supports the various needs of the diverse student population by undertaking and designing a system of supports with the implementation of the MTSS framework by

providing training to administrators and some staff but this was halted during the COVID-19 disruptions.

Throughout our data gathering, we found examples of the status of the implementation of MTSS in RSUSD.

- In interviews, focus groups, and surveys, staff did not mention the MTSS process.
  - When asked about MTSS, staff often described it incorrectly or didn't know what it was.
- Training was begun for administrators but there is not a common understanding of the purpose or process.
  - The secondary schools have begun to explore MTSS as an option for improvement.

### *Pre-referral interventions*

As part of the review of the alignment of systems across RSUSD, pre-referral interventions were examined. Pre-referral interventions are a powerful strategy to both intervene early to assist students with the additional support they need and to use as a diagnostic tool to better understand the needs of students on the cusp of being referred to special education. We found the following:

- Some pre-referral interventions exist in some sites but overall, the process is not well defined as a district-wide strategy and therefore varies from site to site.
- 50% of staff respondents on the staff survey indicated that an effective tiered-intervention system was **not** in place at their school.
- The pre-referral process and the referral process for special education or Student Study Team (SST) process are not well linked and protocols are not in place allowing each site to do it differently.

As RSUSD and schools across the country are beginning to emerge from the last two tumultuous years and we are all learning to live in this reality, it will be necessary to re-visit and re-engage in creating and implementing new systems which are designed to address the needs of all learners. New areas of need have arisen and it has become clear that going back to business as usual does not address the new reality. This provides an opportunity for RSUSD to build a system of supports that is based on student needs and provides a preventative focus on supporting students when they are beginning to struggle. It also creates an opportunity for the District to pause and re-think their overall vision and re-engage staff, students, and families in creating the new vision and redesign of the process of how to get there. The following considerations are suggested as the District moves forward:

- Within these re-engagement strategies, it will be critical to revisit the district's MTSS processes and specifically define the tiers of intervention and support and implementation process.

- This will include identifying ways to make the tiers more robust and inclusive to accommodate the changing levels of need students are experiencing related to the pandemic.
- Continuing to focus on building the system of supports for ensuring access, engagement, and success for all students should be at the heart of the design.
- As RSUSD designs their system, it will be important to focus on a design that provides an increased emphasis on **preventing** school failure by identifying and **intervening early** when students need extra support and providing focused intensive supports when and where they are needed.
- By focusing on creating, defining, and implementing a system of supports RSUSD will be able to design the system that is less in crisis mode and more focused on being proactive with immediately available supports.

## In Their Own Voices

Summary of feedback from focus groups, interviews, and surveys related to Theme 1:

Summary of feedback from **Staff**:

### Strengths

- *We have staff who work tirelessly to provide a great education for students with special needs as well as all students.*

### Challenges

- *We don't have consistent collaboration and support for our students who receive special education services in our district and we still need to improve in many more ways.*
- *We need to have a more efficient process for screening students and actually provide an adequate amount of time to meet the needs of those students through interventions and supports.*
- *Referral process is inconsistent and not always aligned with or part of the MTSS process.*

## Why It Matters

**Systems alignment.** RSUSD leadership and the Board of Education keep the mission, vision, values, and goals at the forefront of district-wide 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 policies, procedures,

### In Their Own Voices

*"The MTSS process should work in a consistent way across the district."*

Administrator

and actions schools and programs are to model.<sup>4</sup> The authenticity of this message is affirmed through the district's development of a strategic plan for a special education program that manifests the mission, vision, values, and goals and then the district's establishment of the conditions necessary for principals and teacher leaders to implement the program effectively.

Considerations for implementation of an aligned system:

- A prevalent theme that resonated throughout interviews, focus groups, and surveys was that RSUSD does not have a cohesive, consistent system of interventions or supports to assist students when they struggle with learning or behavior.
- There is a critical need to nurture and propagate a mindset of shared responsibility among teachers, administrators, and staff not only in the program they work in but in all areas of work across the District.

**Multi-Tiered System of Support.** Through the implementation of MTSS, the learning of *all* students, including students with disabilities and multilingual learners, are supported through clear initiatives, resources, and continuous improvement. MTSS provides a framework for designing and organizing system-wide resources, strategies, and practices that result in improved academic, behavioral, and social outcomes for all learners, regardless of whether they are struggling or have advanced learning needs. The principles and practices of MTSS are based on what research has shown to be effective in both creating and successfully sustaining systemic changes as well as identifying what is necessary to provide the most effective instruction to all students. An MTSS focuses on state standards, core instruction, differentiated learning, student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and the alignment of systems necessary for student success.

Implementing MTSS involves significant paradigm shifts. Often, past response to intervention (RtI) programs were structured with a focus on interventions for a few students. In comparison, MTSS systematically addresses prevention for all students. A sound MTSS framework begins with:

- A focus on high-quality, best first instruction within the general education class (Tier 1), which is designed to support the needs of all learners through the use of the UDL framework.
  - Specifically, within Tier 1 instruction, students experience learning environments with clear learning objectives and concrete success criteria aligned to the rigor of the standards.

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<sup>4</sup> Wallace Foundation, 2013

- These key ideas are also represented in culturally affirming ways, and with embedded options allowing students to have multiple ways to show mastery. This flexible, inclusive, and standards aligned core instruction creates a solid foundation for a district's tiers of support.
- Through universal screening and regular progress monitoring, MTSS allows staff to more quickly move from identifying which students need help (Intervention) to providing the specific assistance necessary to support each student's needs (Prevention).
- This shift requires districts and schools to move from simply having programs and people available, to intentionally designing and redesigning services and supports so that they match the needs of students.

Another important aspect of MTSS is collaboration. Collaborative educational decisions are based on data derived from frequent monitoring of student performance and rate of learning that addresses the linguistic, academic, and social-emotional needs and opportunities of every student. Collaboration promotes a continuum of evidence-based supports and interventions with increasing levels of intensity and duration that address students' specific and individualized needs.

It is also important to:

- ensure that all staff understand their role in the system of support and receive the appropriate training and coaching to develop their capacity to provide the appropriate support.
- commit the time to identify the various roles and responsibilities of all staff in the MTSS process and provide them the training support needed to build their skills to ensure staff are available and used in the most effective and efficient manner.

**MTSS and inclusive practices.** Inclusive practices are an important part of the MTSS process (see Theme 4). It is critical that district and site leaders play a role in implementing inclusive practices in their schools. Principals and teachers must have a deep knowledge of inclusive practices and how they will be demonstrated in the school.

Having a philosophy of inclusiveness means that:

- In addition to determining the provision of services and placement, the entire school staff must understand the needs and instructional strategies that best support the diverse learning needs of students in their classes.

- Leadership must guide the process and work with staff to understand inclusive practices by including staff in designing a framework for which inclusive practices may be integrated into the school culture.
- They also must support the assessment and monitoring of their students' access to general education classes and the degree they are living up to these inclusive values as evidenced in their actual practices.
- Additionally, these administrators must create protected times where special education staff and general education staff can collaborate on a regular basis about instruction and instructional supports that have yet to happen. This allows students to come into classes that are ready for them from the beginning.
- District administrators and key instructional staff should know the current rates of inclusion within each school in the district and have key goals and aligned strategies for monitoring and continuing to improve the success of the program overtime.

## Recommendations

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

### *Recommendation 1: Consider updating and re-engaging the district's mission, vision, values and goals.*

A clear vision and mission will provide a common understanding of the purposes and goals for the district and will address concerns regarding a consistent direction by school staff. Vision and mission statements answer the following questions: Why do we exist? Who do we serve? What is our purpose? How do we aspire to serve? What are our values? It will be important to include stakeholders in the development of the statements, share widely, and revisit and reiterate often.

Once established, it will be important to align the special education strategic planning to the District's vision and mission, values, and goals and develop a communication plan for engaging all staff in understanding and implementing the next steps.

This process should include:

- clearly and regularly articulating the district's mission, vision, values, and goals and disseminating to staff, community, students, and stakeholders
- checking often with staff to ensure understanding of the mission, vision, values, and goals



- ensuring that all communication reflects the mission, vision, values, and goals and that decisions are anchored to the tenets of the mission, vision, values, and goals, from boardroom to classroom
- creating a process for communicating topics and considerations to sites, using a cycle of inquiry, and investigating questions
- ensuring that appropriate data is available and used for all discussions and decision points, and
- ensuring that stakeholders have clarity around decision-making.

*Recommendation 2: Create a new or re-engage an MTSS leadership team to develop, articulate, and implement the district-wide sustainable MTSS framework (as outlined in the section on MTSS implementation in Appendix A).*

While RSUSD had already begun to develop a system-wide approach for MTSS it is not being applied in a consistent way across the district. There is a need for a re-engagement and renewed process to ensure that all staff are clear and engaged in the process. It is suggested that:

- RSUSD develops and engages an MTSS executive leadership team to guide the implementation and development of a common framework for implementation.
- The MTSS executive leadership team should establish or reestablish working teams to design how to carry out the actions developed by the leadership team.
  - One such team should consider selecting research-based, best-practices and programs for Tiers 1, 2, and 3 and provide ongoing professional development to ensure implementation of the framework with fidelity.
  - An initial and critical focus should be to ensure that Tier 1 (general education classroom) is designed to support all students to the greatest extent possible. This should include:
    - Tier 1 should be a standards aligned and inclusive core instruction that uses the principles of UDL as an instructional framework to mitigate some of the need for intervention, provide improved access to core instruction in the general education classroom for students with IEPs, and support the learning needs of all diverse learners.
    - Core instruction should provide students with ample opportunity to reflect on their own learning and the degree they are meeting classroom learning goals. In addition, the team should determine universal supports

for behavior, such as a consistent approach to PBIS as well as academic needs.

- Another team should focus on finding a strategy to collect and monitor who is accessing Tier 2 and 3 interventions, for how long, and their rates of success in attaining educational goals as a result of these services.
  - Effective professional development might include instructional coaches working directly with those implementing the programs. Consider a collaborative model of support at each tier that would employ the talents and expertise of both general education and special education staff.

*Recommendation 3: Enhance the comprehensive MTSS process with consistency by developing a manual. The district's MTSS process should be documented, clearly communicated, and upheld by administration as an integral part of the commitment to improving outcomes for all students.*

Develop a comprehensive manual that provides important information and local guidance about the MTSS and details district wide policies and structures for identifying students who are struggling academically and behaviorally. This would include:

- Aligning the process for pre-referral interventions and referral for special education into the systematic process for the tiers.
- The purpose of the manual is to provide guidance to educators on how to use the MTSS within a problem-solving framework that informs instructional decisions and supports.
- Policies for MTSS referral structures should include a process that monitors the degree referred students have experienced a true and equitable representation of the district's espoused vision of the MTSS and the RSUSD's model for the tiers of support.

Resources which are recommended to support the above recommendations are contained on the next pages.

## Resources for Theme 2

Data-Based Decision Making Protocol: <https://intensiveintervention.org/data-based-individualization/progress-monitoring>.

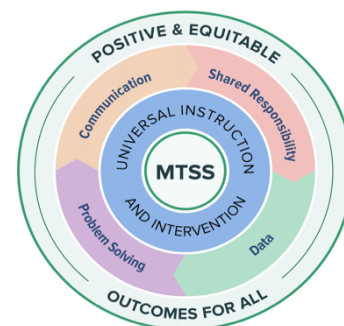
The following resource helps teams when they are trying to decide how to proceed with student-level problem solving and data-informed decision making.

- The National Center on Intensive Intervention has learning modules on Data-Based Individualization (DBI) as a key component of the MTSS framework.

### WestEd's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS):

WestEd provides implementation support to develop and implement an integrated, comprehensive, and data-driven Multi-Tiered System of Supports customized to your school district. Build the capacity to support all K-12 learners, including English learners and students with disabilities.

- WestEd services can be accessed at: <https://www.wested.org/service/multi-tiered-system-supports/>



## Theme 3: Policy, Procedures, and Communication

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RSUSD's special education department has developed structures and written policies and procedures but is lacking clear processes for communicating, implementing, and monitoring the use of these to guide consistency and efficiency in the provision of special education services.

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### Strengths

- WestEd's review of the district's IEPs revealed that, in terms of basic compliance, most of the staff understand how to complete the components of the IEP.
  - The data shows that 80% of the IEPs reviewed indicate that the staff understand how to develop Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance which include data and contain the pertinent current classroom information that paints a picture of the child. This speaks to a procedural knowledge of ensuring all pieces of the IEP are complete and that data included in the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance guides the development of the goals and services.
- A special education procedural manual is being developed containing the district's practices for implementing required policies and procedures. This will assist with developing consistency in practice among staff and will provide a guide for new staff as they learn their role.

### Key Discoveries

- A new position of Coordinator of Special Education was created three years ago and a new director was hired to focus on improving the special education department.
  - New Coordinator has focused on developing processes and protocols for special education procedures. The new procedures have been reported to be welcomed improvements by special education teachers, administrators, and parents.

- New lead teacher roles have been established to support middle and high schools in particular but also support all special education teachers.
- A key issue identified in the focus groups, interviews, and surveys was that staff (particularly new staff) were sometimes unclear about their defined roles and responsibilities, special education procedures, and where to locate the information or seek assistance.
- Policies and procedures for pre-referral interventions and referral for special education are in need of alignment with the MTSS framework to streamline the process for improving alignment in accessing supports and services across the system.
- As stated above, WestEd's review of the district's IEPs revealed that, in terms of basic compliance, most of the staff understand how to complete the components of the IEP.
  - Areas of strength include:
    - IEPs meet minimum compliance
    - Goals and reporting on progress on goals are well done.
    - Good use of quantitative data.
  - But there were several consistent issues that were noted throughout the IEPs reviewed. These included:
    - The need for a clear through line from the impact statement to the present levels, to the goals, and the potential harmful effect statement.
    - While student strengths were addressed, a more robust description and use of qualitative data about the student's strengths would be helpful in more clearly defining the student's strengths.
    - Parent concerns were often included in the IEPs, it would be helpful to work with parents to provide a more well-rounded picture of the student from the family perspective.
  - Staff reported that the IEP checklist and training on IEP development has really helped them improve their IEPs.
- 57% of parent respondents on the survey indicated that they were **not** satisfied with the communication between their student's school and home.
- 56% of parent respondents on the survey indicated that school personnel have not helped them to understand their student's disability.
- 50% of parent respondents on the survey indicated that they were **not** satisfied with the process for identifying their child as a student with a disability.

## Data Review and Analysis

The following data expands upon the Key Discoveries.

**Consistent Policies and Procedures.** As discussed in Theme 2, there is a need for increased alignment across the RSUSD referral process for special education (Student Study Team process) and the MTSS process.

In interviews, focus groups, and surveys, both general and special education teachers reported the following:

- Staff requested a quicker, more efficient referral process for special education, and
- Staff also expressed a desire for more training and a process for staff to develop a deeper knowledge of pre-referral interventions and strategies that support students when they struggle in their classroom.

Staff have received some initial training on “Beyond SST” but additional training is needed. This process will help with clarity and consistency on the SST process as well as the development of strategies to assist students which are aligned with their identified needs and will help with documentation of the use of the strategies.

Updating and aligning these processes to clarify how the Student Study Team process and MTSS processes interact would improve the efficiency of the intervention processes and provide additional information about the student’s needs from the attempted pre-referral interventions. This creates an opportunity for RSUSD to engage with teachers and administrators collaboratively to transform practices around students with disabilities and students who are experiencing challenges with both behavior and academics but do not qualify for special education services so that all students are better served. This can be achieved by:

- Exploring and expanding the use of UDL principles as a way to provide the “good first instruction” to make learning more accessible for all students.
- Building staff capacity to be proactive and create lessons which are accessible for all learners rather than reactive to students who are struggling with more traditional one-size-fits-all instruction.
- Creating a collaborative tiered support system with interventions which are monitored and adjusted when needed and aligning all with inclusive practices and supports will help to ensure that all students are receiving the supports to be successful.

**Individualized Education Program (IEP) Review.** As described in the previous section, WestEd’s educational benefit review process is different from a compliance review. A

compliance review monitors for the inclusion of components of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the IEP; an educational benefit review looks for interconnectedness of the components. The main components to determine educational benefit were:

- Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance, to include the impact of the disability on the student's ability to access the general curriculum
- Measurable Goals
- Specialized Academic Instruction
- Least Restrictive Environment
- Consideration of Potential Harmful Effects

As previously stated, WestEd's review of the district's IEPs revealed that, in terms of basic compliance, most of the staff understand how to complete the components of the IEP. From an educational benefit perspective, however, our review showed *the following*:

- 80% indicated that they received core instruction in the general education
- Student strengths were addressed but could be more robust to provide more well-rounded qualitative data about the student
- 80% gathered parent input thereby meeting the minimum compliance
  - However, more robust parent input is desired to help provide a more well-rounded qualitative data about the student.
- 60% had an impact statement that was clearly written.
  - Some of the impact statements were vague or general and not specific to the student and the specific disability.
- 80% had statements regarding potential harm that was specific to the student with a clear line on the reason for the placement in special education and general education
- Limited description of the support for dually identified students who are English learners and a student with a disability.

### **Measurable Goals**

Measurable goals must demonstrate a correlation between the needs listed in the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance and the goal. The goal needs to describe the skill and level of performance that will be achieved in the year allowing the child to make progress in the general curriculum.

Of the IEPs reviewed,

- 80% had present levels clearly stated

- 100% show goals that were measurable and skill-based goals aligned to present levels
- 90% used quantitative data that supported the placement, goals, and course of action for student success.

Areas of possible training to improve the areas of need:

1. Developing strength-based IEPs that provide robust data regarding the student
2. Gathering parent input to provide a more robust picture for student benefit. This might involve conversations with and training for parents including some questions designed to gather input on areas of strength and need that the parent sees at home.

### *Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI)*

The IEPs reviewed also mostly contained a description of the Specialized Academic Instruction including what the teacher or other types of supplementary supports and services will be provided. However, the classroom observations revealed more drill and practice and group work on worksheets which did not appear aligned to the general education standards or curriculum.

### **In Their Own Voices**

**Summary of feedback from focus groups, interviews, and surveys related to Theme 3:**

Summary of feedback from **Staff**:

#### **Strengths:**

- *Staff work very hard to support student needs.*
- *Staff care deeply about their students and want to make improvements in processes to support their needs.*

#### **Challenges**

- *Some staff, particularly new staff, do not have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting the needs of students with disabilities.*
- *The definitions for types of accommodations and how they are applied varies from teacher to teacher. Need more consistency and understanding about these.*
- *Site principals indicated a need for ongoing training and updating on special education policies, procedures, and best practices so that they can effectively*



*participate and lead IEP meetings and provide support to special education staff.*

Summary of feedback from **Parents:**

### Strengths

- *Appreciate the time and effort that staff put into the IEP and designing the supports that are needed for students.*
- *Children have access to different services and supports.*

### Challenges

- *The school needs to have better communication between the special education teacher and regular teacher and to the parents.*
- *More communication with parents about their needs and how their student is making progress is needed.*

## Why It Matters

**Consistent policies and procedures.** Navigating the special education process can be difficult. Facilitating an effective process starts with developing a plan for special education that focuses on concrete steps to prioritize efforts, allocate resources effectively, and align stakeholders and staff to the goals of the special education department. These should include:

- The use of regular, ongoing planning which engages a continuous improvement process to continually use program and student data to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.
- Establishing consistent policies, procedures, and processes ensures that students with disabilities or suspected disabilities will be identified, evaluated, and provided appropriate educational services in the LRE and in accordance with federal, state, and district requirements.
- Training on these policies helps to clearly define the special education rules, regulations, procedures, and protocols for schools and staff to follow.

### In Their Own Voices

*"We need more clear and timely communication for all staff on expectations and directives so we can all be on the same page."*

Site Principal

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. Principals, teachers, school staff, and parents can all play a role

in the effective leadership of a school site.<sup>5</sup> In addition, district leadership has been found to have a positive influence on turning around low-performing schools.<sup>6</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 students with disabilities and their peers.<sup>7</sup>

**Procedure manual.** RSUSD's special education policies, procedures, and protocols are being developed and training is beginning to occur. It will be important to develop a process for effectively communicating the processes with all staff to improve the efficiency of the overall special education services thus improving the outcomes of students receiving special education services.

- By utilizing a procedure manual that outlines policies, procedures, and protocols clearly and consistently, staff are not only able to create compliant IEPs, but they also provide the Specialized Academic Instruction that results in educational benefit for the student.
- In addition, the implementation of a procedure manual ensures consistent and equitable practices in special education throughout RSUSD.

**Specialized Academic instruction.** The mandate of Specialized Academic Instruction can be found in IDEA, which defines Specialized Academic Instruction as:

*adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction (i) to address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability and (ii) to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children.<sup>8</sup>*

Specialized Academic Instruction is not an instructional strategy but rather an educational plan that is individually designed by the IEP team to support the student's access to the general education curriculum and to meet specific goals.

Improved organizational outcomes for special education begin with students with disabilities receiving appropriate and targeted SAI, which is the vehicle that ensures students with disabilities have access to grade-level academic standards. For students with disabilities to receive high-quality instruction and services, SAI must be clearly

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<sup>5</sup> Shannon & Bylsma, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Baroody, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Fullan, 2004; Huberman, 2011; Lane, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1990

defined so all staff understand their roles and responsibilities in delivering specialized academic instruction. This involves:

- Adapting instructional content, design lessons, and methods of delivery to address the individual needs of each student with a disability.
- Viewing the IEP as an instructional framework that specifically outlines a student's current level of performance, develops goals based on the needs identified, and provides the SAI to meet those goals.
- Focusing the SAI on providing what is needed to access the curriculum, not reteaching.
- In addition, the IEP must define the role of the special education teacher, their role in providing or supporting Specialized Academic Instruction, and describe the LRE and inclusive practices.

**Communication.** 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>9</sup> Effective communication leads to improved organizational outcomes. Bi-directional communication protocols addressing the mission, vision, values and goals and the continuous improvement aim statement are essential to implementation and sustainability of the system. All invested partners must be actively engaged to ensure they have a voice and role in the system—family, students, educators, community partners, etc.

**Educationally beneficial IEPs.** A compliant, educationally beneficial IEP is the foundation for providing SAI in the LRE for students with disabilities. Many RSUSD staff voiced their concerns regarding the lack of professional development for IEP development, and from the data, IEP reviews confirm this is needed. Professional development in the area of special education policy and procedures is an ongoing process that requires annual updates, reviews, and checks for fidelity of implementation.

In 1982 the US Supreme Court ruled in *Board of Education v. Rowley* that:

- An IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a child with disabilities to receive educational benefit.
- A free appropriate public education (FAPE) and the Least Restrictive Environment became the guiding standard to ensure a child is afforded an opportunity to benefit from the education provided to them. In 2016, the US Supreme Court expanded this standard in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School*

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, 1990

District and ruled that an IEP must be calculated to enable a child to make progress.

- This ruling set the bar that an IEP must require meaningful educational benefit.
- For an IEP to meet the standard of meaningful educational benefit, it must be a meaningful cohesive document that is utilized as an instructional framework as a guide for ensuring that the child is benefiting from the education provided.

Least Restrictive Environment is a principle that determines where a student will spend their time AND how special education services will be provided. LRE does not refer to a specific setting but rather identifies what services and supports a student needs to access the curriculum and where and how those services and supports can be provided. Placement is the continuum of services that ranges from the least restrictive setting to the most restrictive setting. **Within a district's definition of a continuum of services, district educators must adopt an inclusive mindset, set of beliefs, and corresponding priorities to keep an orientation toward inclusion and inclusive opportunities for all students, even those with the most complex needs.**

## Recommendations

The following recommendations address special education policy and process.

*Recommendation 1: Consider updating and aligning the special education department's vision and mission to the re-designed vision and mission of the district.*

As defined under Theme 2, a clear vision and mission will provide a common understanding of the purposes and goals for the special education program and will address concerns regarding a consistent direction by school staff.

Vision and mission statements answer the following questions:

- How do we align with and support the district mission, vision, values, and goals?
- Why do we exist?
- Who do we serve?
- What is our purpose?
- How do we aspire to serve? and
- What are our values?

Include all stakeholders in the development of the statements, share widely, and revisit and reiterate often. In addition, establish a communication plan for the special education department related to its mission, vision, values, and goals using a process as outlined in Theme 2.

***Recommendation 2: Establish a team that is responsible for the reviewing, updating, communicating, training, implementing, and oversight of a policy, procedure, and protocol manual on an ongoing basis.***

The special education manual should be the “go-to” document that ensures consistent direction and interpretation for a variety of audiences. It will allow principals to deliver consistent messages both within and across sites and will assist new staff as well as existing staff with a clear reference of RSUSD’s processes. Ensure the manual is updated yearly or as needed when the state’s special education policies change.

- Distribute the manual and build staff capacity for implementation. Once complete, widely distribute (or post online) a comprehensive special education manual that assists local and district staff in consistently implementing the procedures that support special education policy.
- The manual can be used to:
  - Build and reinforce a common understanding of special education policies and procedures.
  - Operationalize the policies and procedures and ensure the policies and procedures manual operationalizes the procedures for identifying, evaluating, placing, servicing, and exiting students with disabilities from special education.
  - Translate the policy decisions to classroom practice as appropriate.
- Develop a plan for the implementation of district wide processes for pre-referral interventions and referral to special education that incorporates consistent expectations and protocols.
- Distribute the manual and build staff capacity for implementation. Once complete, widely distribute (or post online) a comprehensive special education manual that assists local and district staff in consistently implementing the procedures that support special education policy.

***Recommendation 3: Define and train all staff on their roles in the special education process and clearly define where and how special education supports fit in the MTSS process.***

Identification, evaluation, placement, and provision of services are inconsistent across RSUSD. Providing the training of both special and general educators on the special education process will, ideally, articulate the pre-referral and identification processes, evaluation and eligibility determination, IEP development, monitoring and accountability processes, exit criteria for students, staffing roles, responsibilities, ratios,

parent roles and responsibilities, district policies, and other related topics. Training would provide clarity and guidance regarding the entire program for administrators, teachers, paraeducators, parents, and students.

***Recommendation 4: Build the capacity of site principals to fulfill their role as an LEA representative at an IEP meeting by providing training and coaching for site leaders enabling them to take on more responsibility for this role.***

Site principals have a role to fulfill as a district administrator during an IEP meeting and as the instructional leader for all of the students on their campus. While some principals are comfortable with and are fulfilling this role already, many are not. Building the capacity of principals to understand their role and responsibility to oversee and ensure that the needs of the students receiving special education services are being appropriately addressed. Professional development as well as coaching support will be necessary to build the overall capacity of site leaders to assume more of this responsibility.

***Recommendation 5: Define Specialized Academic Instruction for staff and administrators.***

Defining the purpose of special education and SAI will help clarify the roles and responsibilities of all staff. Providing a clear vision and corresponding examples for what SAI is and is not, how it will support students with disabilities, and who is responsible for what will facilitate appropriate access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. These definitions should also define what delivery of SAI looks like within a classroom employing UDL, including but not limited to, the specific engagement strategies, representation options, and expression choices individual students on IEPs need to be successful in general education programming.

***Recommendation 6: Create policies and procedures for identifying, evaluating, and using appropriate instructional practices for students with disabilities who are multilingual learners.***

Addressing and defining common practices related to students with disabilities who are multilingual learners will assist staff in meeting the unique needs of these students. Policies and procedures should include identifying appropriate and consistent pre-referral strategies, differentiating between language learning needs and a disability, implementing a clear referral process for multilingual learners, and appropriate instructional practices.

Appropriate disability identification processes that evaluate the student's disability-related educational needs and not the student's English language skills will help school personnel accurately identify students in need of disability-related services.

- The pre-referral process provides instructional support within the MTSS framework.
- Through the use of comparative data collected in the process, teams can make objective, data-driven decisions about whether to refer a student for an evaluation.
- Additionally, policy needs to make clear that the LEA must provide students with disabilities who are multilingual with both the language assistance and disability-related services they are entitled to under federal law.

These policies and procedures should be developed in collaboration with both the EL staff and the special education staff so as to model practices needed in identifying a multilingual learner with disabilities.

## Resources for Theme 3

### Roles and Responsibilities Resource Recommendations

- Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., Graf, V., (2018) [Roles of Team Members Supporting Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms](#) Appendix F
- Sabia, R., Thurlow, M., (2021). [Understanding the Role of the Paraprofessional in Your Child's Inclusive Classroom](#). TIES Center Brief # 7
- [Paras in Inclusive Schools](#), Stetson & Associates, Inc. 2019
- [What Are the Roles of Principals in Successful Inclusive Schools?](#) Inclusive Schools Network Blog, August 2019.

### Educational Benefit Review Resource Recommendations

- [Fast Five: Five Questions Answered about Educational Benefit Review](#), (2021) National Center for Systemic Improvement.
- [Educational Benefit Review IEP Tool Kit](#), (2021) Matrix Parent Network and Resource Center
- [Educational Benefit Training Module](#), (2018) El Dorado Charter SELPA

### Dually-Identified, Multilingual Learner Resource Recommendations

- [Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities](#) SELPA Content Lead. Imperial County SELPA was selected as the Content Lead by CDE and California Collaborative for Education Excellence to provide statewide in-person and virtual training opportunities for teachers, teacher-leads/coaches, support personnel, general & special education service providers, and administrators.
  - **Resource pages:**
    - [Linguistically Appropriate Goals and Objectives](#) Padlet with materials, resources, and training videos.

- [Pre-referral and Referral Process for ELs with Suspected Disabilities](#) Padlet with materials, resources, and training videos.
  - [Pre-Referral Flowchart](#): Team considerations for use prior to referral of a Multilingual Learner for Initial Special Education Assessment.
- [Assessment of ELs for Special Education Eligibility](#) Padlet with materials, resources, and training videos.



## Theme 4: Increasing Access and Achievement

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RSUSD has the opportunity to make systemic changes to allow students with disabilities improved access to inclusive environments in order to positively impact academic and social achievement by recognizing that students with disabilities have a place in the general education classroom. This process will be assisted by aligning the supports and services and building staff capacity to provide access and improved progress in the general environment and curriculum.

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### Strengths

RSUSD staff has expressed a commitment to provide access to inclusive environments and practices.

### Key Discoveries

Key data from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and state indicator data.

#### *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)*

- For the FYs 2017-21, RSUSD has been above the state target for the percentage of students with IEPs ages 6-21 participating in the general education classroom more than 80% of the time and within the target for students for students participating in the general education classroom less than 40% of the time and in separate placements (i.e., separate school, residential facility, homebound/hospital). (Table 1).
- For preschool children with IEPs ages 3-5 years, the district is well above the state target for percentage of students participating in regular early childhood programs and within the target for the amount of time students with IEPs are attending self-contained special education programs from FYs 2017 through 2019 (when reported data was available). (Table 2).
- When comparing the LRE data 5a (percentage of students participating in general education for more than 80%) for students ages 6-21 with the peer districts and the state target, we find that RSUSD is below McFarland and Farmersville, about equal with Soledad, and above Coalinga-Huron, Corcoran,

and Parlier. RSUSD and the peer districts are all above the state target for FY 2019 through 2021. (Figure 10).

- The data for the percent of children aged 3 through 5 receiving the majority of special education in a regular early childhood program, indicates that RSUSD was mostly similar to Coalinga-Huron, Corcoran, and Soledad who are all substantially above the state target for all of the years. The rate for RSUSD dropped in FY 2020 but was still above the state target and McFarland and Parlier. (Figure 11).
- 43% of parent respondents on the survey indicated that they were **not satisfied** with the amount of time their student is included in the general education setting.
- 57% of parent respondents on the survey indicated that they were **not satisfied** with the English language services that their student receives.
- There were also comments from parents who felt that their students were not being given the supports to succeed in the general education classroom leading to a widening achievement and expectation gap.
- Further comments from staff indicated that there is a lack of training and collaboration time for general education teachers with special education teachers to allow for co-planning and supports for included students. Comments included:
  - Lack of training for instructional aides and general education staff was frequently mentioned by staff as a challenge.

### **Academic Achievement**

- The scores of students with disabilities on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) for RSUSD is well below the state average scores and the scores of Corcoran and McFarland. RSUSD scores are similar to Coalinga-Huron and Soledad and above Farmersville and Parlier for English Language Arts (Figure 13) for FYs 2018-2022 (excluding FY 2019-20 when the assessment was not administered due to COVID).
- The percentage of students with disabilities who met the state standards for English Language Arts on the **California Alternate Assessment** for FYs 2018-2022 for RSUSD was above the state of California average scores for all the years but the score has decreased substantially over the years. (Figure 14).
- The achievement gap between the scores for the students with disabilities and the students without disabilities on the CAASPP English Language Arts for RSUSD students for FYs 2018-2022 averaged 19%. (Figure 15).

- The scores of students with disabilities on the CAASPP for RSUSD is well below the state average scores and about in the middle of the peer district scores in mathematics (Figure 13) for FYs 2018-2022 (excluding FY 2019-20 when the assessment was not administered due to COVID). RSUSD's scores for the last year are second lowest of all of the peer districts and the state average.
- The percentage of students with disabilities who met the state standards for Mathematics on the **California Alternate Assessment** for FYs 2019-2022 for RSUSD was well above the state of California average scores but difficult to compare due to a lack of public scores due to fewer than 10 students tested. (Figure 17)
- The CAASPP Progress Mathematics achievement gap data for RSUSD students with and without disabilities for FYs 2019-2022 indicates that, with the exception of FY 2021 which may have been impacted by COVID, the average of the gap across the years was 45%. (Figure 18).

### *Instruction*

Of the staff surveyed:

- 68% indicated that time is **not** allotted for collaboration between general and special education teachers to plan for students with disabilities who are included in the general education classroom.
- 48% of staff surveyed indicated that general education teachers **do not** have the knowledge and skills to accommodate the needs of students who receive special education in their classrooms.
- 74% of staff surveyed indicated that there are **not** sufficient opportunities for general education staff to learn about the behavioral needs and supports for students with disabilities;
- 44% of staff surveyed indicated that there are **not** sufficient opportunities for special education staff to learn about general education curriculum.
- 50% of the administrators surveyed indicated that the current organizational structure in special education **does not** have the potential to support site administrators and site special education teams in ensuring quality education for students with IEPs.
- 67% of the administrators surveyed indicated that staffing ratios for related service providers are **not** adequate to meet the needs of the students with IEPs.

- 83% of the administrators surveyed indicated that there are **not** sufficient professional development opportunities for administrative staff to learn about supporting the needs of students with disabilities.

## Data Review and Analysis

The following data and analysis provide examples of the current status of access, to general education and instructional outcomes, for the students with IEPs in RSUSD.

Some of the following data are from federally defined special education indicators. Targets for most of these indicators are established by either the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) or which are set by the states who then monitor the districts for progress towards the targets. The state is required to report the data from the local districts on all of the special education indicators to OSEP which then monitors the state for the progress of their local education agencies (LEAs).

Ongoing monitoring of the achievement gap through assessment data as well the rates in many other areas such as graduation, suspension/expulsion, dropout, attendance, and discipline will help to determine the success of systemic improvement efforts.

Table 1 indicates the data for RSUSD related to the established state targets for the three areas of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) which is Special Education Indicator 5: Education environments (children 6-21):

Percent of children with IEPs aged 6 through 21 served:

- A. Inside the regular class 80% or more of the day.
- B. Inside the regular class less than 40% of the day; and
- C. In separate schools, residential facilities, or homebound/hospital placements.  
(20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(A))

The Table 1 data shows that the data for the Least Restrictive Environment indicator for FY 2016 through 2020 and shows that RSUSD is well above the state target for the target for Least Restrictive Environment indicator 5A, the percent of students who are in the general education environment for 80% or more of their day. For 5B, the percent of students who are in the regular class less than 40% of their day (which should be lower than the state target), RSUSD is under the state target for all of the years and is under the state target for 5C, the percent of students who are in separate placements for all four years.

**Table 1. RSUSD Compared to the State Targets for School-Age Students with Disabilities within the Least Restrictive Environment, FYs 2016 through 2021**

Year	RSUSD ≥80%	5A State target	RSUSD ≤40%	5B State target	RSUSD separate schools, residential facilities, homebound/hospital placements	5C State target
2016-17	65.94%	≥50.20%	17.74%	<23.60%	3.93%	<4.20%
2017-18	72.80 %	≥51.20%	13.81%	<22.60%	3.77%	<4.00%
2018-19	71.30%	≥52.20%	15.70%	<21.60%	3.59%	<3.80%
2019-20	71.74%	≥53.20%	10.0%	<20.60%	NA	<3.60%
2020-21	70.18%	≥58.0%	10.53%	<19.50%	1.75%	<2.90%

Source: CA System Improvement Leads Data tools: <https://aprinicators.systemimprovement.org/>

Indicator 6 Preschool environments: Percent of children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs attending a:

- A. Regular early childhood program and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program; and
- B. Separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility. (20 U.S.C. 1416(a)(3)(A))

Table 2 shows the data for RSUSD in relation to the state targets for Indicator 6.

- RSUSD data for 6A indicates that the District is well above the state target for 6A which measures the percent of students who are receiving the majority of special education services in regular early childhood programs.
- RSUSD is well below the state target for 6B (which is the measure of the percent of students who are receiving their special education services in a separate setting) for all years with the **exception of FY 2020** where the District was outside of the state target. Results from FY 2020 may have been impacted by the issues related to the pandemic and will need to have increased focus to identify any continuing issues.

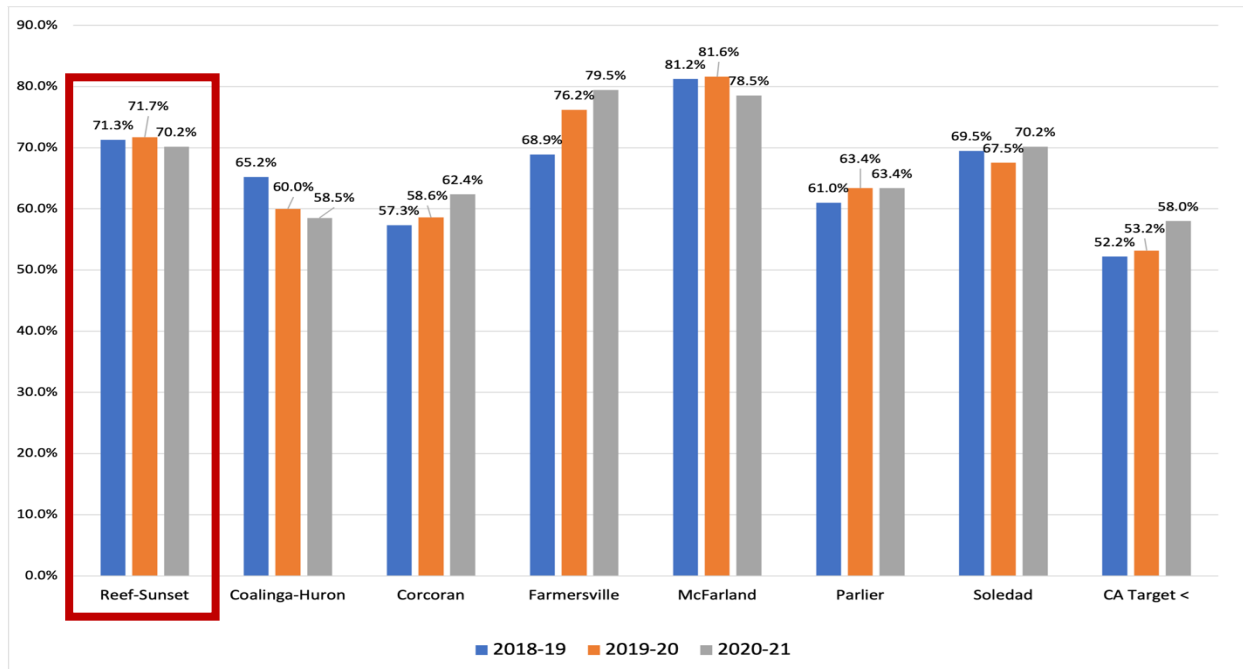
**Table 2. RSUSD Compared to the State Target for Preschool Students with Disabilities in the LRE, FYs 2016 through 2020**

Year	RSUSD In Regular EC Program	6A State target	RSUSD Separate Facility	6B State target
2016-17	50.00%	≥33.90%	30.00%	≤33.40%
2017-16	85.35%	≥34.90%	32.40%	≤32.40%
2018-19	72.22%	≥35.90%	31.40%	≤31.40%
2019-20	NA	≥36.90%	NA	≤30.40%
2020-21	NA	≥39.00%	NA	≤33.00%

Source: CA System Improvement Leads Data tools: <https://apindicators.systemimprovement.org/>

Figure 9 shows the Least Restrictive Environment data for students ages 6-21 for RSUSD, the peer districts, and the state target for FY 2019 through 2021. As compared to the peer districts, RSUSD's rates for Least Restrictive Environment 5A is above the state target but lower than McFarland and Farmersville. RSUSD is above the other peer districts.

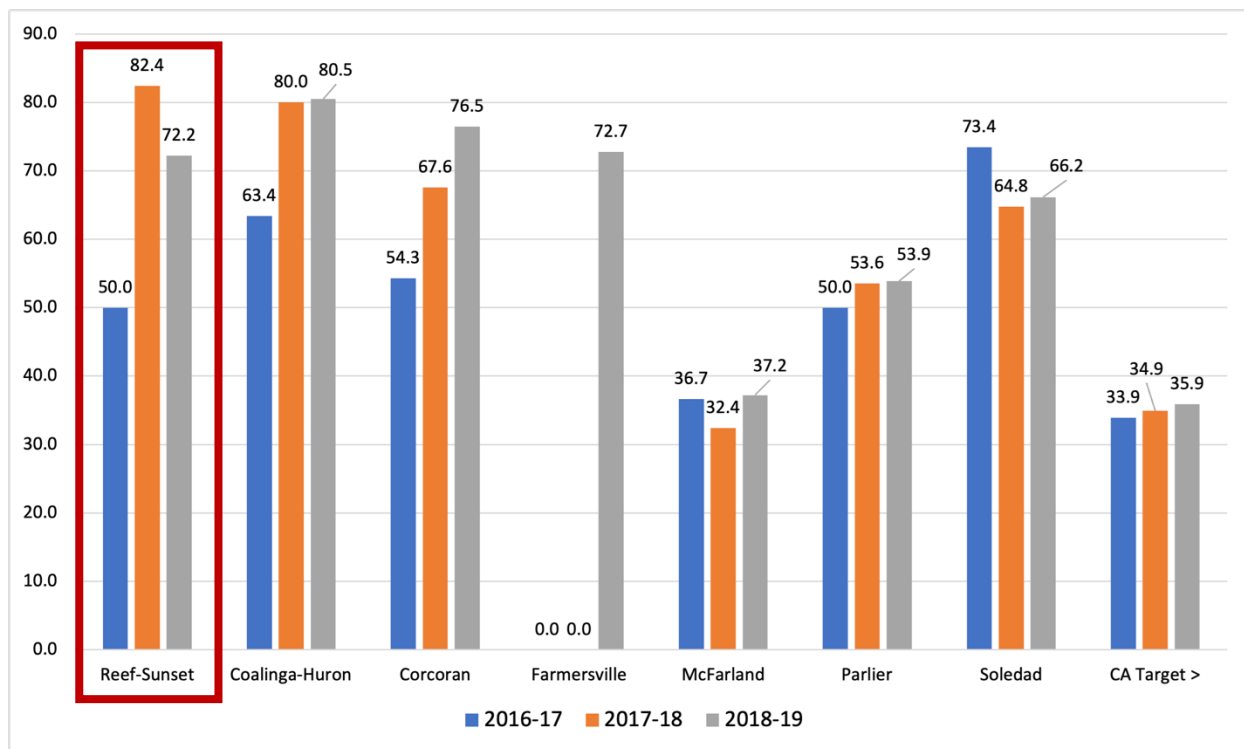
**Figure 9. LRE 5A data for RSUSD, Peer Districts, and the State Target for Students with Disabilities Ages 6-21 for FYs 2019-2021**



Source: CA System Improvement Leads Data tools: <https://aprinicators.systemimprovement.org/>

Figure 10 shows the data for Least Restrictive Environment Indicator 6A which is the percentage of children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs attending a regular early childhood program and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program. The data indicates that RSUSD was mostly similar to Soledad and Corcoran but below Coalinga-Huron who are all substantially above the target for all of the years. FYs 2019-2022 are not presented due to issues created by the pandemic.

**Figure 10. RSUSD, Peer Districts, and the State Target for Percentage of Students with Disabilities Ages 3-5 who Receive the Majority of Special Education in Regular Early Childhood Programs for LRE Indicator 6A for FYs 2017-2019**

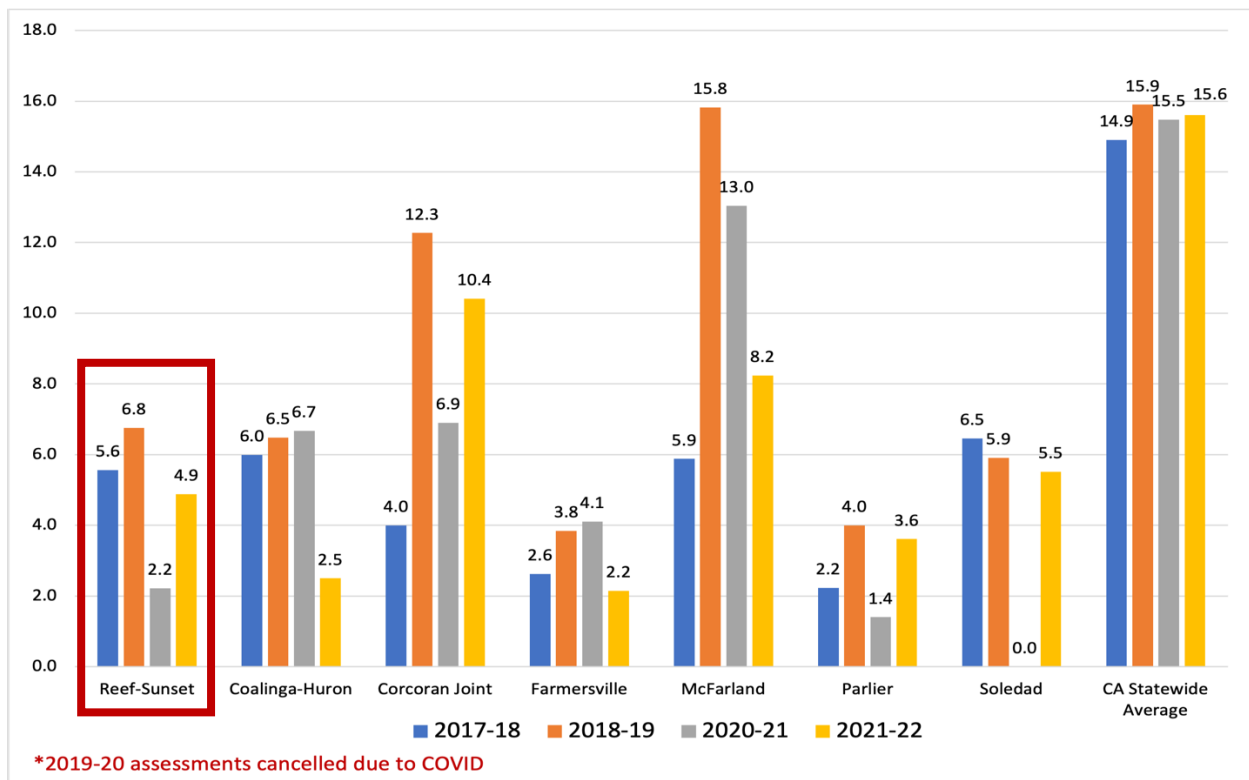


Source: CA System Improvement Leads Data tools: <https://apindicators.systemimprovement.org/>



Figure 11 shows data for the percentage of students who met the state standard for English Language Arts (ELA) on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) for FYs 2018-2021. The percent of students with disabilities who met the state standards for RSUSD was well below the state of California average scores and below all of the peer districts with the exception of Corcoran and Parlier.

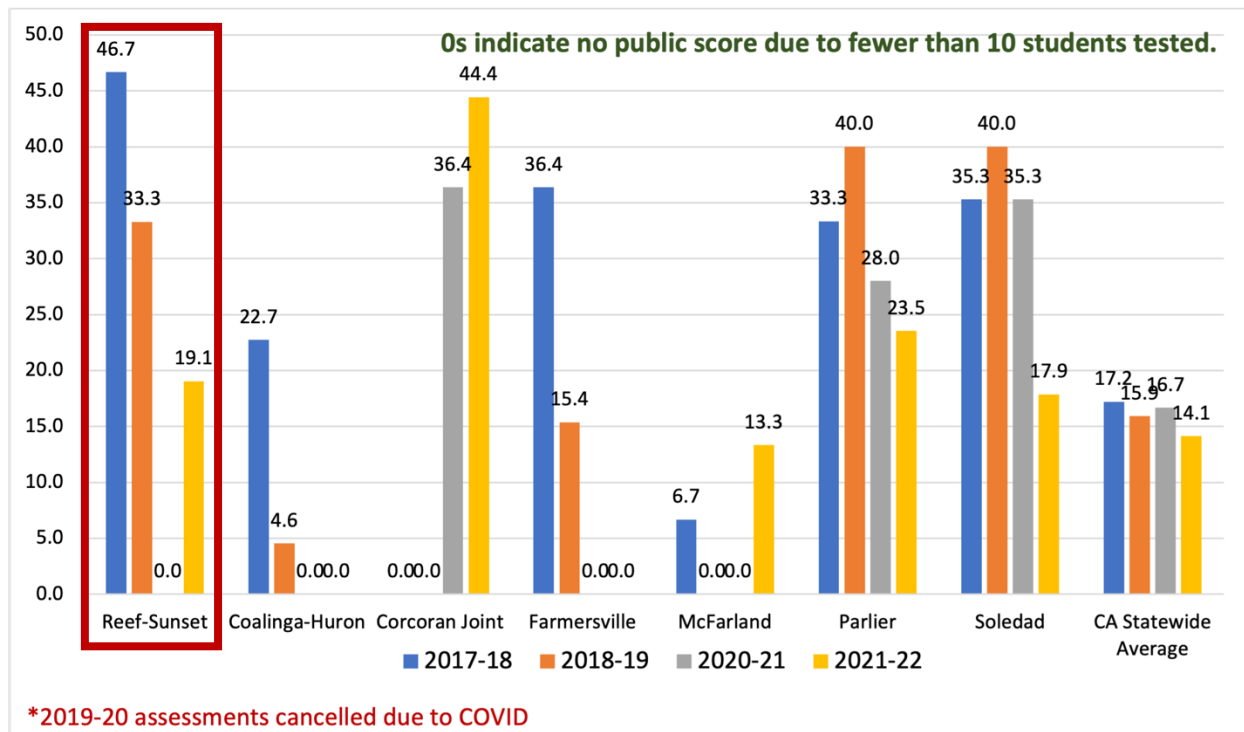
**Figure 11. RSUSD, Peer Districts, and the State for Percent of SWD who Met the State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) on the CAASPP for FYs 2018-21**



Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

Figure 12 shows data for the percentage of students with disabilities who met the state standards for English Language Arts (ELA) on the California Alternate Assessment for FYs 2018-2022. The percent of students with disabilities who met the state standards on the alternate assessment for RSUSD for FY 22 was above the state of California average scores but below all of the peer districts with scores available with the exception of McFarland. Many of the scores were not publicly available due to fewer than 10 students participating in the assessment.

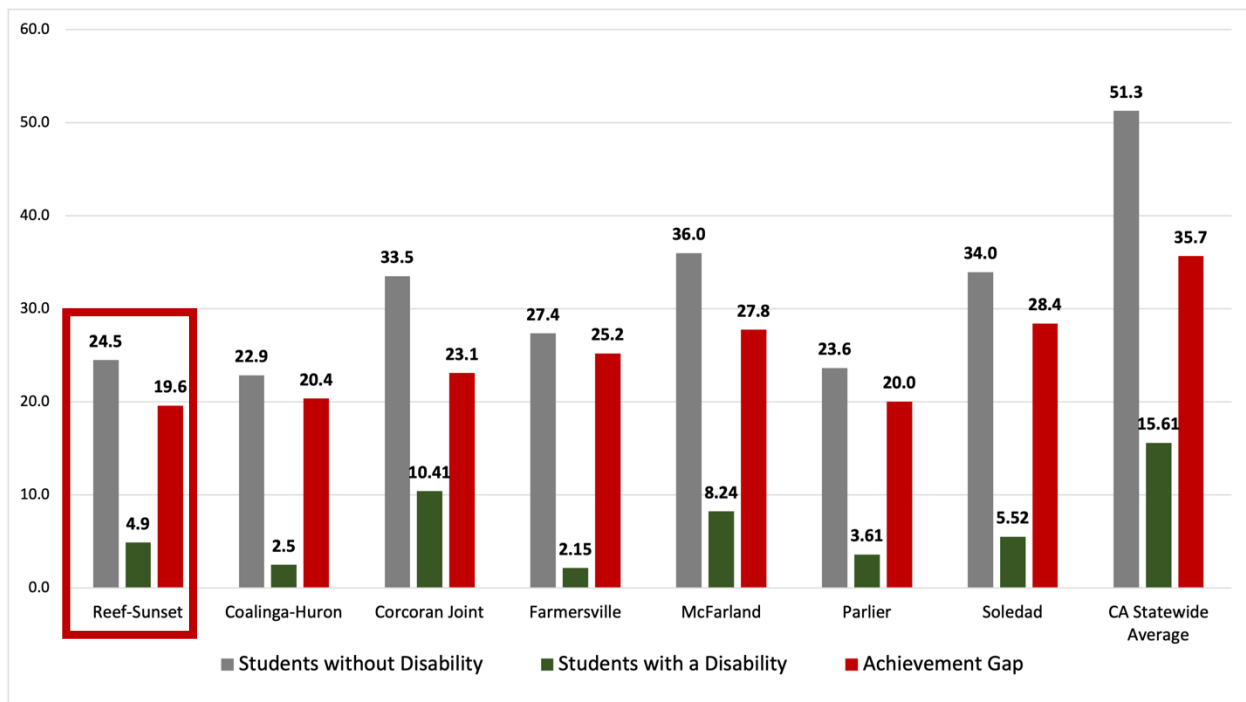
**Figure 12. Percentage of Students with Disabilities who Met the State Standard on the California Alternate Assessment for English Language Arts (ELA) for FYs 2018-2022 for RSUSD, Peer Districts, and the State of California**



Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

Figure 13 shows CAASPP scores for ELA for RSUSD, peer districts, and CA state average scores students with and without disabilities for FY 2022. The achievement gap between the scores for the students with and without disabilities is represented on the graph by the red bar. The average of the gap across RSUSD and the peer districts was 18%.

**Figure 13. Percentage of the Achievement Gap for Students With and Without Disabilities who Met the State Standard for English Language Arts (ELA) on the CAASPP for FY 2022 for the Peer Districts and State Average**

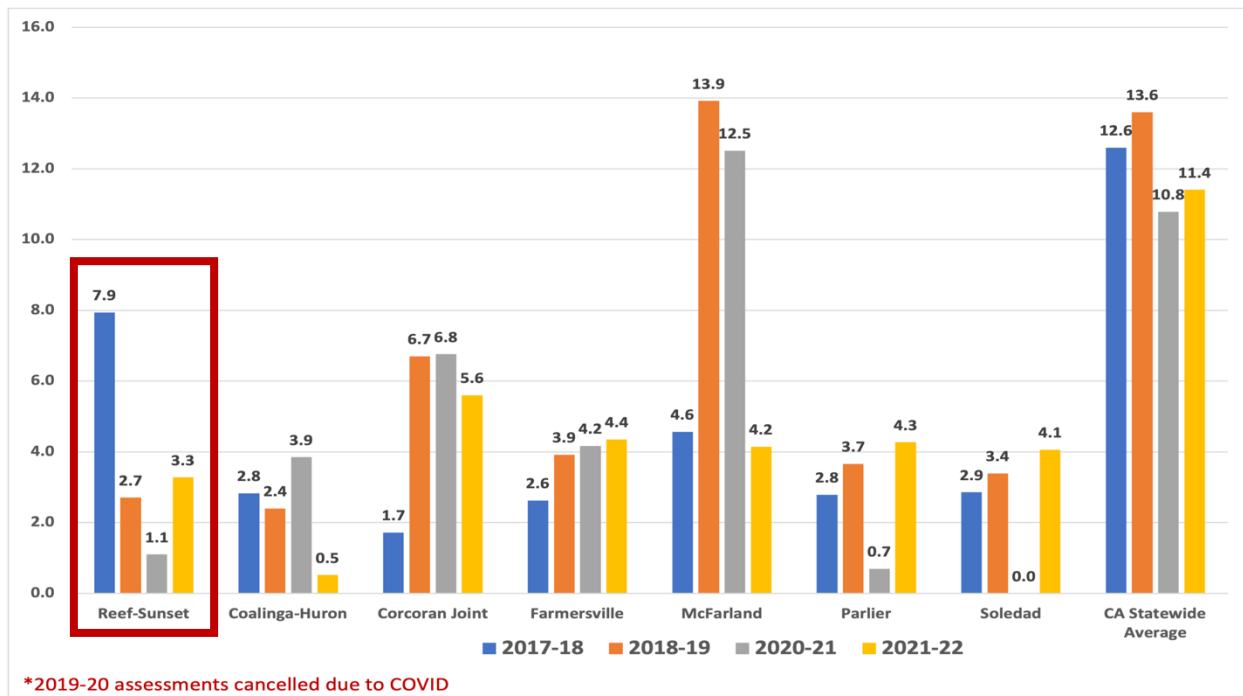


Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

The percent achievement gap data should be lower or decreasing as the RSUSD develops a more robust system of identifying students who are struggling and provides appropriate interventions to accelerate their learning. In addition, providing appropriate accommodations and instruction designed using UDL principles to address the learning needs of students with diverse needs along with providing appropriate Specialized Academic Instruction and support, will yield improved results for the students with IEPs.

Figure 14 shows data for the percentage of students who met the state standard for Mathematics on the CAASPP for FYs 2018-2022. The percent of students with disabilities who met the state standards for RSUSD was well below the state of California average scores and similar to the peer districts.

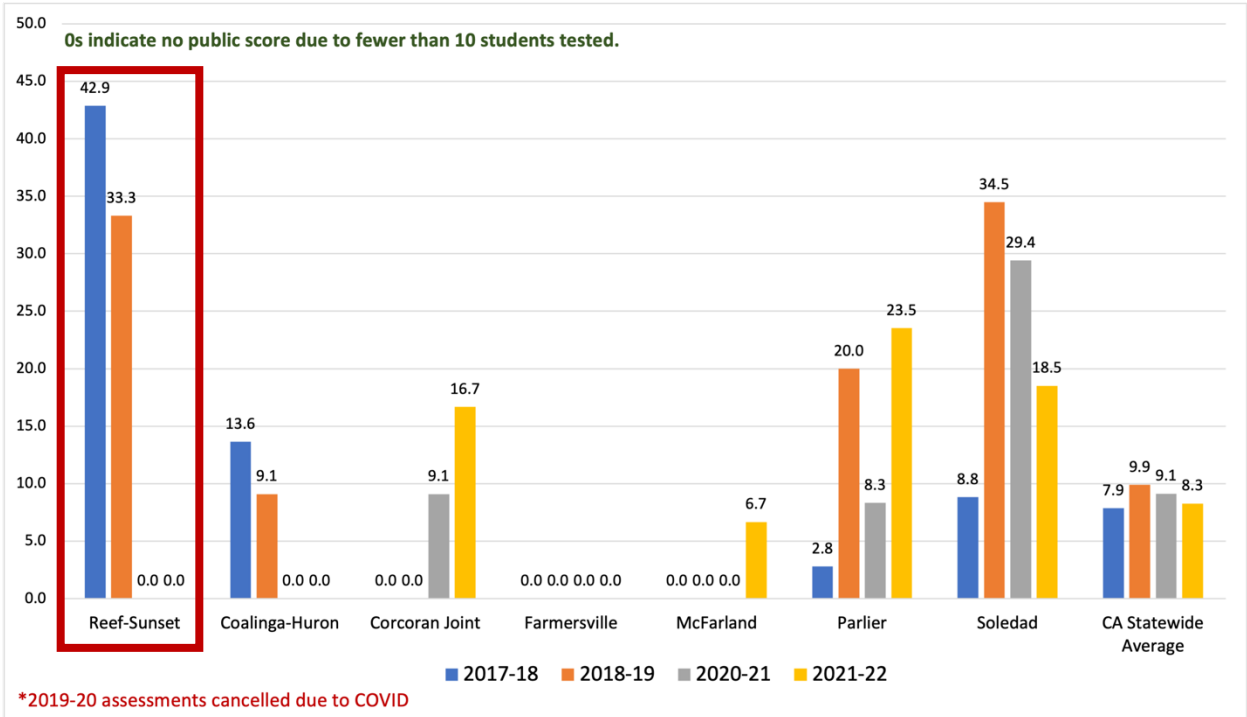
**Figure 14. RSUSD Compared with the Peer Districts and the State for Percent of Students who Met the State Standard on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress for Mathematics for FYs 2018-22**



Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

Figure 15 shows data for the percentage of students who met the state standard for Mathematics on the California Alternate Assessment for FYs 2018-22. The percent of students with disabilities who met the state standards for RSUSD was well above the state of California average scores.

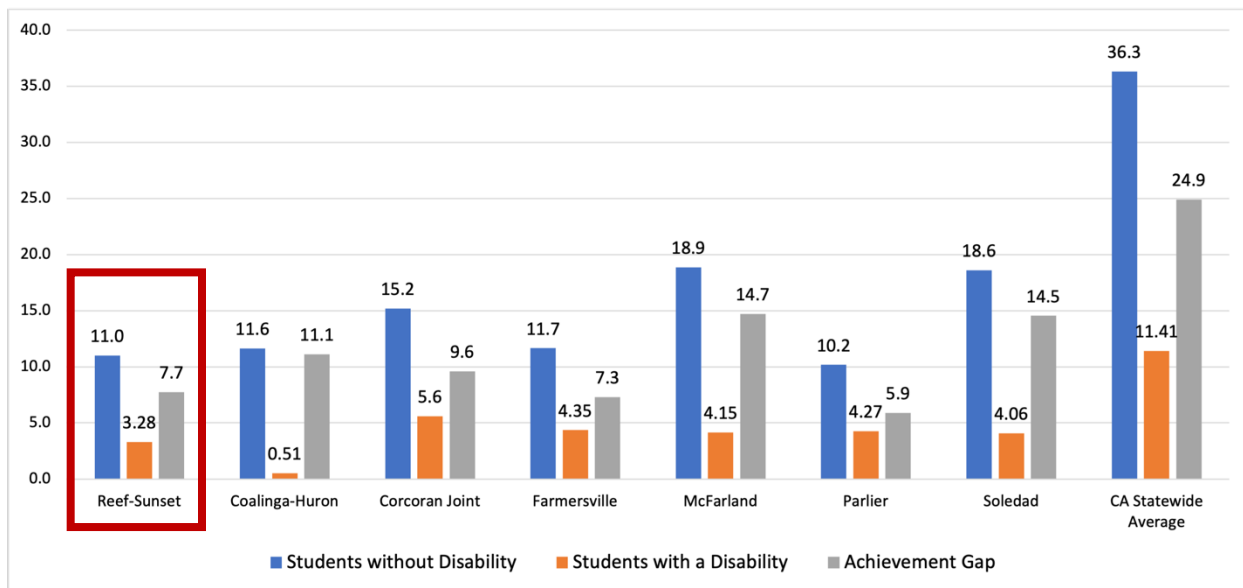
**Figure 15. Percentage of Students with Disabilities who Met the State Standard on the California Alternate Assessment for Mathematics for FYs 2018-2022 for RSUSD, Peer Districts, and the State of California**



Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

Figure 16 shows CAASPP scores for Mathematics for RSUSD, peer districts, and CA state average scores students with and without disabilities for FY 2022. The achievement gap between the scores for the students with and without disabilities is represented on the graph by the gray bar. The average of the gap across RSUSD and the peer districts was 10%.

**Figure 16. RSUSD Achievement Gap between Percent of Students With and Without Disabilities who Met the State Standard for Mathematics on the CAASPP for FY 2022**



Source: CAASPP Website Data: <https://caaspp-elpac.cde.ca.gov/caaspp/Default>

The achievement gap data indicates that students with disabilities are not achieving at a rate similar to students without disabilities in the District. It also shows that the students without disabilities are scoring well below the CA state average scores. Ideally, the systemic improvements recommended in this report should bring about improvement for the students with disabilities as well as the students without disabilities.

Monitoring this data will help the District determine the success of the implementation of the MTSS framework with a greater focus on prevention and intervention instead of remediation. Improvements should be seen for all students and the achievement gaps should be decreased due to the systemic improvement made through the design and implementation of:

- UDL in Tier 1 and a focus on best first instruction designed to make lessons accessible to the diverse learners in the general education classroom
- Appropriate strategic interventions and supports in Tier 2
- Intensive interventions and staff supports in Tier 3

## Additional Data on Access and Inclusivity

Input on the school programs was gathered from site observations, survey responses, interviews and focus groups with staff, students and parents.

Historically, limited access and exclusion of students with disabilities from the general education classroom is a practice that increases a learning gap already present. Disability is often viewed through the lens of a medical model, which focuses on a deficit and on what an individual cannot do. In this model, disability is often a diagnosis, something to be fixed. As a whole, districts have responded to this diagnosis by separating students with IEPs rather than presuming their inclusion and membership into general classrooms. However, the expectation for students with disabilities to increase their achievement in academic and social skills cannot be met by limiting their access or excluding them from the general education classroom.

Data from classroom observations, focus group and individual interviews, surveys and review of IEPs has yielded the following:

- RSUSD has been working to increase the amount of inclusion into general education over the years. The design of the service delivery seems to be somewhat formulary based on staffing.
  - RSP teachers now push into the general education classrooms to support students. Teachers report that this has been beneficial but there are issues.
    - Teachers report that with only one RSP teacher at most elementary sites, the RSP is often pulled from the push in to support student issues that occur on the campus and is then not available to support the students in the classes.
    - Secondary schools do not typically have instructional aides available for the RSP classes
  - Students in the Special Day Class (SDC) go to PE and some electives as well as recess and lunch but typically go as a group so that staff can provide support.
  - It has been difficult for the SDC teachers to support all grade levels in the elementary schools which are (Transitional Kindergarten-5<sup>th</sup> grade)
  - There are limited instructional aides available which has limited the inclusive opportunities.
    - It has been difficult to find and hire aides and there is limited time for training and collaboration with the teachers.

- Co-teaching is being attempted at the secondary level but there are issues and challenges that create barriers to the success of the program
  - These include a lack of ongoing training and support for the staff to understand and design models that allow for parity of roles of both teachers.
  - Special education staff are frequently assigned to multiple classes during the same period.
  - Co-planning time is often not scheduled and teachers have to do planning on the fly.
- Collaboration between general and special education teachers is challenging.
  - The role of the special education teachers in general education grade level or department level meetings has not been defined and the special education teachers don't feel that they are an active participant as they have multiple groups to join due to the numerous grade levels that they support.
  - Many general education teachers have developed strategies to support students with diverse needs.
    - It was frequently reported that more training for general education staff (teachers and administrators) was needed to develop more systematic ways to support the students with IEPs in the general education classrooms.
- There appears to be a lack of a common definition of inclusion across the district and lack of clarity about the roles of various staff in supporting students with IEPs to engage and learn in the general education classroom.

Surveys indicated that:

- Most staff (62%) feel that students are provided access to instruction in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible.
- 76% indicated that general education teachers provide the necessary accommodations or modifications for students with IEPs.
  - When questioned about who provides the accommodations and modifications and support, it was reported that general education teachers do what they can but are often busy running the class to provide the necessary support.
  - 70% of respondents on the staff survey indicated that included students are primarily supported by special education staff when they are in the general education class.
  - 52% of respondents indicated that there are **not sufficient** opportunities for general education staff to learn how to support the academic and behavioral needs of the students with IEPs.
- 43% of respondents in the parent survey indicated that they were not satisfied with the amount of time their child was educated in the general education



classroom and did not think their child was educated in general education to the maximum extent appropriate.

- 57% were not satisfied with the in-school activities that were available to their child.

Despite the support and belief in the inclusion model in RSUSD, it was evident that there was an overall need to develop and support a more defined and structured system of inclusive education that indicates the District's vision for inclusive education. This means that all teachers and staff need to have a deep understanding of the "why" inclusive education is the vision **and** have the skills to more adequately address the diversity of needs that exist within the classroom.

However, there is an opportunity for RSUSD to work closely with teachers, administrators, and staff to discuss ways to transform this more traditional notion of viewing students with disabilities in order to better serve all the RSUSD students. Only in growth-reinforcing cultures, in which teachers and administrators are developed and encouraged to safely fulfill their own potential to engage all students, will professionals be able to help their students thrive in bias-free environments. These complex cultures 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 structure of the system also needs to be designed to allow the staff to be able to fulfill the vision of an inclusive system. This means:

- Building a system that includes regular, ongoing collaborative planning for data-driven instructional design, allocating support to general education classrooms to build the scaffold that plans for and provides differentiated instruction and targeted supports driven by the academic and behavioral needs of the students.
- Building the capacity of all staff to understand and carry out their role in the system through training and coaching to build their capacity
- Designing the overall system of supports to focus more on the prevention and interventions and focus the intensive supports on the small group of students who need them, by clearly understanding the continuum of supports in special education.

### Dually Identified Learners

Dually identified learners or multilingual learners with disabilities are a large population for RSUSD. Comments in the focus groups, interviews, and surveys indicate:

- While there are resources available for students who are multilingual, the EL and special education staff have had trouble finding time to collaborate on these resources.
- Staff are not always differentiating for students with both issues.
- Respondents see this as an area in need of additional resources.
- A new EL coach has been hired and beginning to work with staff.

It will be important for staff to have an understanding of how to develop IEPs that meet the language needs as well as the special education needs of dually identified students. Special education and EL staff should collaborate and training should be provided on developing IEPs that support EL student's needs and includes goals to meet those needs.

### In Their Own Voices

Summary of feedback from focus groups, interviews, and surveys related to Theme 4:

Summary of feedback from **Administrators**:

#### Strengths:

- *We believe that inclusion and the inclusive environment will build positive relationships between special education staff and students/families.*

#### Challenges

- *We need to focus on building Tier 1 (the general education classroom) to support all learners. This needs to be our foundation for all students.*
- *We don't have dedicated collaboration time for co-planning and collaboration between general and special educators. This is needed to ensure that planning time for instruction and support is occurring.*
- *We lack a strong instructional pedagogy on best practices for students with disabilities. We can't build an inclusive philosophy without the application of evidence-based practices to support the model.*

Summary of feedback from **Staff**:

#### Strengths

- *Push in model for students with disabilities seems to be working better than the pull-out model we used in the past.*
- *The teachers are willing to do what it takes to support the students in special education.*

## Challenges

- *Inclusion only works if the supports are there. Co-teaching only works if the supports and staffing are there. We need more options for push-in support.*
- *We need more training for our general education staff and administrators on how to support students who are included.*
- *Our special education teachers should not be teaching 2-3 classes during one class period.*

Summary of feedback from **Parents**:

## Strengths

- *Special education staff are excellent, knowledgeable and care deeply for the students.*
- *My daughter is able to get the help she needs.*

## Challenges

- *There isn't enough training for instructional aides and teachers to know how to appropriately accommodate the curriculum and instruction to meet my child's needs.*
- *I would like to see the SDC students integrate more.*

## Why It Matters

### Inclusive Education Research

A 2010 study published in the *International Journal of Special Education* compared achievement scores of students who were fully included in the general education classroom to those of students who were self-contained. The study concluded that the students who were fully included in the general education setting outscored their self-contained counterparts significantly.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a recent study of the outcomes for students with IEPs in California found that for students with an IEP, including students identified in each disability category, greater participation in a general education setting is a strong predictor of academic growth and improved outcomes as measured by statewide assessments.<sup>11</sup> A 2007 meta-analysis of inclusive education research found

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<sup>10</sup> Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010

<sup>11</sup> Dautre, 2021

that 81% of the reported outcomes showed that including students with disabilities resulted in either positive or neutral effects for students without disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, high-performing schools have cultures characterized by:

- high expectations, organizational intentionality, community engagement, teacher collaboration, and high degrees of practices that promote a “psychology of success.”<sup>13</sup>
- These characteristics 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>14</sup>
- With leadership from teacher leaders, school teams can build an intentionally crafted, safe, positive, supportive, academically focused, and inclusive culture.
- Learning environments that include all students being explicitly taught not only the skills of being a strong student, but also the dispositions, habits, and traits that are possessed by highly effective and successful adults facilitate and build student leadership and good decision-making.

In a brief published in March of 2021 and presented to the U.S. Department of Education, nine organizations which support individuals with disabilities published a brief, [9 Recommendations for Inclusive Learning Recovery for Students with Disabilities](#) with recommendations to address learning recovery from issues related to the pandemic for students with disabilities. The recommendations from this brief will be useful in engaging the stakeholders around common themes based on District data and will assist with creating a new definition of the goals of the efforts. The recommendations include:

1. Ensure all students have equal access to all learning recovery programming and are meaningfully included.
2. Ensure all students are educated in the Least Restrictive Environment.
3. Recognize special education services are separate and apart from learning recovery programming.
4. Incorporate inclusive progress monitoring practices within learning recovery programming.
5. Enable meaningful collaboration between professionals.

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<sup>12</sup> Kalamouka, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Almanzan, 2005

<sup>14</sup> Brand, 2003; Fleming, 2005

6. Create opportunities for inclusive and purposeful stakeholder engagement.
7. Provide inclusive and transparent data on learning recovery programming.
8. Align resources equitably and efficiently.
9. Invest in inclusive and actionable research.

These recommendations, which are more fully explained in the full text of the [brief](#), should be useful as the District engages in further definition and updating the goal of inclusive and meaningful access for all students with disabilities.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations address access, instruction, and achievement across RSUSD school sites.

*Recommendation 1: Establish common definitions, values, and goals for building equity and access to inclusive schools by engaging both administrators and teachers in leading groups in a discussion regarding the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders about what it means to be an inclusive district.*

One overriding theme for RSUSD is the need to examine the differences in attitudes and beliefs toward students with disabilities across the district in order to address the and build a common vision for special education. Discussion groups could lead to the exploration of attitudes, the development of common definitions and norms for supporting students, and a focus on implementing a bias-free, positive program culture, the outcome of which would be to establish collective commitments to achieve inclusivity goals. Successful implementation of the goals for inclusivity will require that RSUSD ensures the following:

- Develop a district definition of what it means to be an inclusive district and build this inclusive culture through thoughtful strategic planning, staff and stakeholder collaboration, defining roles and responsibilities of all staff to and professional development.
- Site principal leadership is trained and well-versed in the goals, the mission, vision, values, and goals (Theme 2), and their role as a leader, which is setting a cultural and narrative tone that is less zero-tolerance and more prevention-oriented.
- A growth mindset and inclusive practices are built throughout all of the levels of the district, shifting the focus from compliance to outcomes for students with disabilities.
- Set a standard of shared professional development opportunities to support the development of inclusive practices, beginning with UDL, for all instructional staff as a basis for creating access to general education environments for all learners.

- Provide sufficient resources to ensure that special and general educators receive ample learning and collaborative planning opportunities that are targeted toward the discoveries of this report.
- Consider conducting a book study with staff, using the book *Your Students, My Students, Our Students: Rethinking Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms*,<sup>15</sup> to build a new understanding and mindset for staff on building an inclusive culture.

***Recommendation 2: Develop the skills of the general education and special education teachers to support the learning needs of the students currently being served.***

One overarching theme from focus groups and interviews is the need to build a common understanding and the knowledge to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Staff felt they needed more training and coaching to support the needs of diverse learners.

- All teachers need professional development on inclusive practices, collaboration, SAI, and UDL principles. Special educators need more professional development and coaching on SAI. General education teachers need professional development on understanding the various types of disabilities and purpose of special education.
- Increase the leadership capacity of school leaders (e.g., principals, assistant principals, etc.) to administer special education and to establish and improve feedback loops among principals, teachers, and district office special education administrators to improve the alignment and ownership of the special education staff and students.
- Provide training in the high-leverage practices in special education to all staff in order to support students with disabilities. High-leverage practices are essential practices that support student learning and are necessary for implementing evidence-based practices effectively. When high-leverage practices are used along with evidence-based practices, they support improved outcomes for students with disabilities.
  - Information about and resources for high-leverage practices can be accessed at [High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities](#) and the Brief from the CEEDAR Center on High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices: A Promising Pair<sup>16</sup>
- Establish, within formal district structures, the infrastructure for increasing ongoing planning time between general education and special education teachers. In

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<sup>15</sup> Jung, 2019

<sup>16</sup> McCray, 2017

conjunction with these infrastructure changes, provide professional learning that equips general education and special education teachers in strategies for working together in ways that cross organizational silos.

***Recommendation 3: Continue to implement, expand, and support co-teaching as a service-delivery model.***

Focus group participants expressed an understanding of co-teaching as special educators in the room who support general educators rather than teachers as equal partners. Co-teaching is a service delivery model in which there is parity through shared instructional responsibility and accountability. While each teacher's level of participation may vary depending on the instructional strategies, there should be shared ownership of the classroom.

Co-planning, which is critical in allowing the teaching pairs to plan lessons outlining the roles, responsibilities, and support that each teacher will provide, is critical to the successful implementation of successful co-teaching. RSUSD should consider redesigning the built-in collaboration time to allow for co-planning and for meaningful collaboration for co-teaching, push-in support and inclusive practices to occur

Use the following strategies to implement co-teaching as a service-delivery model:

- Develop schedules to provide services in co-taught classes when ELA and math are taught. When needed for skill development, use a pull-out model to provide direct instruction to groups of students with similar learning needs for short periods of time. Ensure that students with disabilities receive instruction and grade-level content within the general education environment to the maximum extent appropriate.
- When students need both co-teaching support and resource pull-out support, reduce fragmentation of learning by ensuring the pull-out does not occur during core instructional time.

***Recommendation 4: Ensure students with disabilities who are multilingual learners have the supports and services they need to meet both their English language needs and their special education needs.***

Focus groups and interviews articulated that the services for dually identified, multilingual learners should be improved. Consider convening a collaborative team of general educators, special educators, and multilingual learner specialists to further develop the framework in order to provide guidance on meeting the language needs and special education needs of multilingual learners. Elements of this framework should include:

- developing a pre-referral intervention process to support the needs of multilingual learners in the classroom before referring students for evaluation
- providing professional development for all staff on differentiating between language acquisition and a possible disability
- training staff in the collection and analysis of comparative data to identify multilingual learners who are not achieving academically at grade level or are not acquiring English language proficiency at the same rate as their true peers
- ensuring that goals are linguistically and culturally relevant by establishing policies and procedures for ensuring students with disabilities who are multilingual learners, receive both English language support and SAI and that there is consideration of the student's progress in their ELD when developing goals
- structuring the IEP team so that it includes individuals with expertise in second language acquisition or ELD in order to address the impact of language on the student's IEP
- including in IEPs whether the student is a multilingual learner and, if so, how the student's language learning needs will be met, and
- ensuring all teachers are trained in strategies for multilingual learners.

***Recommendation 5: Provide training on the IEP process through an inclusive lens rather than a compliance lens.***

RSUSD has the knowledge and skills to develop compliant IEPs. However, although mostly compliant, the IEPs are not always cohesive documents that provide the instructional frameworks to ensure meaningful educational benefit. Missing from many of the IEPs are clear descriptions of the educational needs that stem from the student's disability and information about the SAI and related services the student needs. Train special educators on developing an IEP that identifies a student's needs and includes SAI to meet those needs. This process can include the following:

- Develop and implement training for staff that reinforces that an IEP should be an instructional framework. Its components should be connected rather than simply included — IDEA clearly states that a relationship should exist between an IEP and classroom activities. For an IEP to meet the standard of requiring meaningful educational benefit, it must be a meaningful, cohesive document that can be used as a guide for ensuring the student is benefiting from the education provided.
- Provide training on the educational benefits of developing IEPs that align present levels, needs, goals, and services.



- Include information on how to determine the least restrictive environment of students and the role of the special education teacher.
- Revisit decisions on how the LRE is determined. Consider coalescing a group to discuss and define LRE and how to communicate that LRE is not a place or a setting but, rather, program decisions about what services and supports a student needs to be successful and includes where and how those services will be provided.

## Resources for Theme 4

### Inclusive Practices Resources

- **Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP):** <https://www.sipinclusion.org/>
  - Funded by the California Department of Education: The program's aim is to provide unparalleled statewide technical assistance to educational communities in their pursuit of inclusive and equitable systems. Together we seek to empower each student to be purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal directed within an environment of belonging, community and connection.
- **CHIME Institute:** <https://www.chimeinstitute.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=343483>
  - The CHIME Institute, a nonprofit organization established in 1990, is a national leader in the development and implementation of an unique model of inclusive education. The institute began with an early childhood program based at California State University, Northridge. The success of the early childhood program, coupled with the needs of the community and sound research, prompted a group of parents and Cal State Northridge faculty to develop a charter elementary school in 2001 and a charter middle school in 2003. The two schools were merged into kindergarten through 8th grade in 2010 and named the CHIME Institute's Schwarzenegger Community School.

### Other Resources on Inclusive Practices

- Brief published in March of 2021 and presented to the Department of Education, from nine organizations which support individuals with disabilities: [9 Recommendations for Inclusive Learning Recovery for Students with Disabilities](#) with recommendations to address learning recovery from issues related to the pandemic for students with disabilities.
- Book study recommendation for building an inclusive culture: Jung, L. A., Frey, N., Fisher, D., & Kroener, J. (2019). *Your student, my students, our students: Rethinking equitable and inclusive classrooms*. ASCD.

- [TIES Center](#) is the national technical assistance center focused on inclusive practices and policies. It works with states, districts, and schools to support the movement of students with disabilities from less inclusive to more inclusive environments. Materials, tools, and resources for supporting all students to be involved in more inclusive environments.
- CEEDAR Center Brief: [High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices: A Promising Pair](#)
- More information and resources on High-Leverage Practices (HLP):  
<https://highleveragepractices.org/>
  - High-Leverage Practices Self-Assessment:  
<https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HLP-Self-Assessment-508.pdf>

### Multilingual Learner Resource Recommendations

- [California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities](#), CDE's manual which was developed to provide information on identifying, assessing, supporting, and reclassifying ELs who may qualify for special education services and pupils with disabilities who may be classified as ELs. The manual or guide will also assist leaders in developing and implementing policies and practices related to ELs with disabilities. Support for implementation of the manual can be found at the CDE supported Content Lead for English Learners with Disabilities:
  - [Improving Outcomes for English Learners with Disabilities](#) SELPA Content Lead. Imperial County SELPA was selected as the Content Lead by CDE and California Collaborative for Education Excellence to provide statewide in-person and virtual training opportunities for teachers, teacher-leads/coaches, support personnel, general & special education service providers, and administrators.
  - Resource pages:
    - [Linguistically Appropriate Goals and Objectives](#) Padlet with materials, resources, and training videos.
    - [Pre-referral and Referral Process for ELs with Suspected Disabilities](#) Padlet with materials, resources, and training videos.
- [Multilingual Learning Toolkit](#) is an online hub of research-based key principles, instructional practices, and accompanying resources, and is the result of a collaborative effort between practitioners, experts, and researchers. The key audience for this work is teachers who work with Multilingual Learner children in PreK-3rd Grade as well as program administrators and higher education faculty members.

## Curriculum and Resource Recommendations for Secondary and Post Secondary Supports

### Self-Determination Resources.

- <https://imdetermined.org/> This website has a variety of tools and recommendations for building a beneficial self-determination program in a secondary setting. The one pager and the "my good day plan" are particularly beneficial.
- <https://selfdetermination.ku.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Teachers-Guide-2019-Updated-Logos.pdf>. This link provides a pdf of the Teacher's Guide for the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction. This is a framework that is beneficial for embedding self-determination, problem solving, decision making, and so forth into every conversation, coaching, and facilitation a teacher does with a student.

### Academic Support Resources

- Academic Seminar Handbook: <https://www.pbis.org/resource/the-high-school-behavior-education-program-2nd-edition> This handbook gives a very detailed setup with lessons and a scope and sequence for implementing an academic seminar in secondary settings. The focus of this resource is on learning organizational skills, social skills, and self-advocacy during a seminar time period. Many high schools have used this as a Tier 3 intervention.

### Career and Technical Education Resources

- Access and Equity Webinar Series: <https://sckesc.wixsite.com/accessandequity/v2>. The Kansas State Education Department developed a webinar series on access and equity within CTE with a focus on equitable access and participation for students with disabilities. This website sends you to all the modules and webinars on this. Accessing the v2 webpage focused on a Deeper Dive and CTE and IPS would be the best recommendation as these modules focus on students with disabilities.

### Secondary Transition Resources as a Whole

- <https://transitioncoalition.org/> The Transition Coalition website provides a wide array of resources, everything from modules for professional development on transition topics (i.e. self-determination) to reviews and use of various different transition assessments.

## Theme 5: Improving Equity, Climate, and Capacity

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There is a continued need to provide school staff and administrators with collaborative, high-quality, system-wide professional development focused on optimizing the access and engagement that students with disabilities have to general education, through differentiating and accommodating instruction, and improving equity, behavioral, and social-emotional systematic instruction, and intervention.

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### Strengths

- 60% of comments in the parent surveys and 39% on the staff survey indicated there are caring and committed staff in RSUSD who support each other and care deeply for the students and families they serve.
- Teaching and mental health staff are working together to support student needs.

### Key Discoveries

#### *Climate and Culture*

Comments in staff surveys, focus groups, and interviews indicated:

- The physical environment of the school was identified by students as a potential barrier in their education experience. They cited the school buildings as not very welcoming and were concerned about the lack of modern amenities.
- Many staff were feeling overwhelmed and burned out after the last two years of pandemic challenges with limited support from the district for their own mental health.
- Difficulty hiring new and qualified staff and turnover rates were consistently reported to be of concern by both parents and staff.
  - There is not enough staff and substitutes to address the increased needs of students which has left unfilled positions.

- Finding new and experienced special education teachers has been a challenge.
  - Most of the new teachers that have been hired are new to the field and in need of a great deal of support.

### *Behavior, Discipline, and Disproportionality*

- Of the 16 classes that were observed, the following behavioral expectations and supports were noted:
  - 46% had classroom management procedures listed.
  - 54% had transition routines evident.
- PBIS was mentioned as a previous focus for the district but it was also suggested that it be revisited.

### *Professional development*

- The need for training was frequently mentioned in focus groups and on the surveys as a substantially key need.
- Overall, there was a high percentage of staff respondents on the surveys who indicated with the following statements about professional development opportunities to learn about the needs of the students with IEPs:
  - 36% indicated that opportunities for administrative staff were lacking.
  - 48% indicated that opportunities for general education staff to learn about academic and behavioral needs were lacking.
  - 39% indicated that opportunities for administrative staff to learn about cultural and linguistic needs of students with IEPs were lacking.
  - 52% indicated that opportunities for all staff to learn about cultural and linguistic needs of students with IEPs were lacking.
- Staff survey respondents indicated the following as the top areas on which they would like more professional development:
  - IEP process, supporting and accommodating students with disabilities, PBIS, MTSS, classroom management, UDL partnering with families, and co-teaching.

## Data Review and Analysis

### *Climate and Culture*

The climate and culture of a district has an impact on everyone and everything that is a part of the district, from the staff to the students, to the families, and the community. When asked, if you could be the Principal, what would you do differently? One student stated, "I would change everything! The first thing is building design. This building has nothing fresh. How are we going to keep up?" The physical environment of schools is important and all schools in RSUSD should be welcoming and a source of pride for the community.

Additionally, the last two years of the pandemic both of these have been deeply impacted in RSUSD as in all schools across the country. Overall, the climate across the District has remained fairly good over the course of the last two years of the pandemic. While staff, students, and families were extremely grateful to be back in person and getting "back to normal" the process has had some challenges. Some of the issues include:

- Staffing shortages and hiring new staff have created some open positions.
  - Turnover in teachers has occurred over the last 2 years and it has been difficult to find new, fully qualified staff.
  - Half of special education teachers are new to teaching.
- Frequently changing health and safety mandates, precautions, and uncertainty about health and safety of all involved has created stress and anxiety in staff, families, and students - the impacts of which are still being realized
- Some students are exhibiting more challenging and disruptive behavior than has previously been seen.
  - This has caused challenges for all in how to help students re-engage successfully in the school setting again.

The district culture, or the systems of how things are done in the district has experienced some challenges. Staff expressed that they feel like they are in crisis management mode at times. Yet among all of this, the staff have continued to work to engage and re-engage in the District's long term goals and support the students and each other.

Data from the staff and parent surveys, interviews, and focus groups

- Respondents continued to support and embrace the goals of the district.
- There were frequent positive comments about the caring supportive staff and leadership across the district.

- Staff survey respondents indicated a need to learn more about the abilities of students with IEPs and the strategies for helping these students succeed.
  - Gaining an understanding of the wide variety of abilities and challenges that exist can be helpful to understanding that students can and do learn in different ways given the opportunity to accommodate their needs.

As stated in Themes 2 and 4, this is an opportunity to engage staff and stakeholders in the vision and mission of the district and help to reignite the passion and growth mindset necessary for achieving the goal of an equitable and inclusive district. Collaborating across the district to create an MTSS leadership team should help to target and prioritize where to begin to address the challenges across the various areas of need.

Resources to assist in identifying specific needs in each area can be found in the tools and resources from the [National Center on Safe, Supportive Learning Environments](#) and their [Self-Assessment and Action Planner](#) provides data to assist leaders in knowing where to start building a positive school climate. The [Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements](#) contains activities and resources for developing a plan for addressing the high-need areas identified in the self-assessment.

### **Behavior Support**

District mental health services available:

- There are three district psychologists, two prevention-intervention specialists who are under contract with Kind Center (Kings County Behavioral Health) services and Spear Net for severe services – have a space
- Two Prevention/Intervention specialists work with the community and school psychologist, counselors, case managers, work with site teams to provide services and refer out.
  - They work with all students, run social skills groups, and provide support in the classrooms. One specialist focuses on older students and the other specialist focuses on elementary students.
- District psychologists work with the special education case managers.

Challenges:

- It has been a struggle with behavior of some of the students who are being included in the general education class this year.
  - They keep being removed from the general education class due to disruptive behavior.
  - More supports, training, and coaching with the general education staff would be helpful to develop an understanding of the behaviors and to

develop strategies to support students who need to re-orient to the classroom setting.

- Supports are not well coordinated and there is not a well-defined process for who gets what services.
- There is an overall lack of Tier 1 and 2 behavior supports.
- Alignment and definition under the MTSS process would be helpful to know which services and supports fit under Tier 1, 2, or 3.
- MTSS implementation has been slow and lacks a systemic approach. PBIS could be implemented under the MTSS process.

### *Professional Development*

Professional development needs were frequently mentioned in responses to surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Comments from staff and parents highlighted some of the issues and needs for professional development:

- There is a lot of training and initiatives that are occurring across the district. Some are district focused and some are site level initiatives.
  - There is a need to coordinate these under the MTSS framework to ensure that there is alignment with the district mission, vision, values, and goals and that they are data-based to assist with prioritizing the initiatives and professional development.
  - It will be important that all of the initiatives and professional development focuses on supporting all learners who would benefit from it.
- Training on UDL, accommodating, and modifying curriculum and lessons as well as time to collaborate is critical to support the needs of students with diverse needs in the general education classroom.
  - Training for the special education staff is occurring on UDL which is important that these staff understand and use the strategies but it is important that the general education staff have training and coaching to implement UDL principles in lesson design so that they can provide instruction that is designed to engage all diverse learners. This will provide the opportunity to develop lessons that are accessible and successful from the beginning, decreasing the need for additional differentiation and accommodations.
  - Looking for ways to embed more training and coaching into the existing day would help with implementation of UDL and modifying curriculum.
- Training for instructional assistants is minimal and planning time with the special education and general education teachers on individual students is often on the fly or non-existent.
- Training and onboarding for new teachers and new instructional assistants is a critical need.



In the survey, staff were asked to identify their top priorities for professional development. The top responses include:

- IEP Process
- Supporting and accommodating students with disabilities
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports
- Classroom Management
- MTSS
- UDL
- Partnering with families
- Co-teaching

## In Their Own Voices

Summary of feedback from focus groups, interviews, and surveys related to Theme 5:

Summary of feedback from **Administrators**:

### Strengths:

- *Staff are caring and responsive to students and parents.*
- *Some sites are implementing inclusion with success.*

### Challenges

- *Not all staff have a growth mindset or an understanding of inclusion and responsibility for all students.*
- *Student behavior has been a challenge this year.*

Summary of feedback from **Staff**:

### Strengths

- *Many general education staff are welcoming and supportive of the move toward increased inclusion.*
- *Staff have worked hard to support students and each other during this challenging year.*

## Challenges

- *Issues of challenging behavior by some students was mentioned as a concern by staff and administrators.*
- *Staff expressed that sometimes behavior and mental health supports were not sufficient to deal with the issues and concerns that arose this year.*

Summary of feedback from **Parents**:

## Strengths

- *Communication with teachers was cited as positive by some parents.*
- *Children feel safe and supported by staff.*

## Challenges

- *Some parents feel that teachers need more training on supporting students in general education especially with social skill development.*
- *Some parents stated that they would like more information on their child's disability.*

## Why It Matters

**Climate and culture.** Climate is the feel or the heart and soul of the school, attitudes, behaviors, points of view whereas culture is how things are done, values, beliefs, norms, and traditions. Research shows that when schools and districts effectively focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to engage in the curriculum, achieve academically, and develop positive relationships; students are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors; and teacher turnover is lower and teacher satisfaction is higher.<sup>17</sup>

### In Their Own Voices

*"It is better for ALL students to learn with ALL their classmates."*

Parent

Best practice for developing inclusive schools includes aligning support systems, collaboration, and ongoing professional development, which combines training and coaching, is embedded in the daily work of teaching and learning, and is cultivated by a community that includes teachers, school staff, mentors, colleagues, coaches, and administration.<sup>18</sup> Aligning the various support systems and processes under the framework of MTSS (see Theme 1) allows a district to create a more seamless process

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<sup>17</sup> Osher, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Jorgensen, 2012

whereby students' needs can be identified early and supports provided to address their needs in a fluid fashion.

***Building a collaborative and inclusive culture.*** RSUSD stands amidst a unique convergence of identified need, staff desire, and a district vision to build a collaborative approach to serving the educational needs of all students.

The intricacy of providing quality special education services that are both legally compliant and educationally beneficial requires the special education department to provide leadership, support, and oversight from qualified, experienced, and knowledgeable individuals and to collaborate with other departments and leadership to align these under the common goal of success for all students.

Providing staff with joint professional learning opportunities reinforces the District's vision of and belief in a unified special education/general education system and contributes to high-quality teaching which is designed to address the needs of diverse learners, that leads to improved results for all students. Implementation should include:

- Begin by building a unified definition and model of inclusive services in RSUSD, to create common understanding as to the goal of inclusion and equity for all students.
- Once there is a common understanding of the goal it will be important to collaboratively work to identify roles and responsibilities of staff and build their capacity to design and provide lessons that are accessible by all diverse needs.
- Then examine staffing and service delivery data to determine where additional support might be necessary to address the needs of students with IEPs.
  - This may require the development of more ways for push-in and co-teaching support by special education teachers to provide the direct supports and curriculum adaptations needed and to collaborate with general educators on making lessons more accessible.

To address staff recruitment and retention challenges, it is highly recommended that RSUSD refine its professional development planning and programming to address the reported needs and to build capacity within its organization for sustained support of high-quality staffing. This includes improving the support for new and inexperienced teachers as well as building the capacity of all of the educators to support the diverse needs of all students to the greatest extent possible within the general education classroom.

***Behavioral Interventions and Supports.*** As has been described in each of the themes, behavior challenges have increased since returning to in-person instruction following the pandemic closures. School staff and parents alike have stated that students have

been affected by the issues that the school closures and disruption to the everyday routines that all of us have experienced. Students' reactions to the disruptions and challenges brought about by the pandemic range from socialization to emotional to mental health challenges or a combination of any and all of these.

Many school districts have chosen to engage extra supports including counselors, social workers, behavioral support personnel, or purchased social/emotional curriculum materials and resources with the additional funding provided to ease the effects of the pandemic. While these resources may provide some assistance, they may in fact be short lived when the funding runs out.

A more thoughtful and planful approach is recommended as the District is designing the supports and services within the MTSS framework. These supports should include the following:

- Aligning with the systematic plan that the District is designing for building the system of supports that are designed to address the diverse needs of the students within the district.
- Engaging the District's staff and stakeholders to identify and address the specific needs of the students, families, and staff and develop a plan to address the staffing and support needs through short- and long-term systemic *planning* is strongly recommended.
- Focusing on identifying the needs of the students and developing a model which will begin with an emphasis on **prevention** along with determining where the needs for more intensive supports are, the district will be able to focus on developing a system designed to help students before they experience failure or exhibit behaviors that escalate to the point of crisis.
- Pairing and aligning the models of support with the work that has already begun within the district with the implementation of school-wide PBIS, will create a system of supports which include a common understanding of the classroom management processes and consistent behavioral expectations and processes that creates an effective structure where staff and students know what is acceptable and what is not.

**Professional development.** Educators are consistently on the lookout for strategies and skill development to better refine their pedagogical approach to teaching. Addressing the needs of an ever-widening diversity of students in their classrooms requires mastery of content, effective teaching practices, and solid belief in the potential of students to

learn at high levels of rigor with supported access to general education classrooms in which high levels of learning with age-appropriate peers takes place.

“High-quality professional development leads teachers to gain and refine knowledge of both content and pedagogy; reflects best practices in teaching and learning, helping adults with varied interests, learning profiles, and readiness to learn to work together and feel part of a community of learners; and has a positive impact on the classroom in terms of both teacher effectiveness and student learning.”<sup>19</sup>

Providing school leaders and classroom teachers with high-quality professional development opportunities is a core responsibility of school districts. Although not all workshops or training 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 development is effective when leaders ensure that it is coordinated, that capacity building is continuous, and that staff are making progress toward a shared goal.<sup>20</sup>

## Recommendations

***Recommendation 1: Intentionally focus on improving the climate and culture across the district by specifically developing supports for staff, students, and parents to grow the development of a supportive and inclusive culture across the district.***

Under the direction of the MTSS Leadership team, collect and review data and develop prioritized processes to address the development of an inclusive culture and to provide the social/emotional, and mental health supports and resources to assist all in creating the safe supportive learning environment. Establish a work group to identify the tools and processes that will assist the development of these supports. Some of these recommended resources include:

- The tools such as the resources from the [National Center on Safe, Supportive Learning Environments](#) and their resources.
- [Self-Assessment and Action Planner](#) provides data to assist leaders in knowing where to start building a positive school climate.
- [Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements](#) contains activities and resources for developing a plan for addressing the high-need areas identified in the self-assessment.
- [Leveraging Reset Opportunities to Help Students and Staff Thrive](#), which is a tool which identifies practices for school administrators and classroom teachers

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<sup>19</sup> Strickland, 2009

<sup>20</sup> Fullan, 2004

and others who provide direct support to students to assist with building individual capacity and building a supportive environment.

***Recommendation 2: Examine the behavior supports and district-wide processes for behavioral supports and develop consistent strategies and interventions across all of the Tiers in the system of supports.***

Re-examine behavioral and social emotional supports to address and mitigate the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Utilizing a school-wide, district-wide [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support \(PBIS\)](#), [Restorative Practices](#), crisis prevention, equity, social skills, curriculum as well as the behavior support staff.

***Recommendation 3: Provide intentional and specific professional development on content and topics related to supporting students with disabilities 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.***

Building an understanding of UDL principles will assist teachers and staff in building their lessons with all learners in mind. Professional development and coaching in UDL will gradually replace the one-size-fits-all lessons that have traditionally been used with lessons that allow for options in how students learn and show what they have learned.

- A good resource for UDL is the [Center for Applied Special Technology](#) (CAST), which has excellent materials to help staff build their capacity in universal design principles.

Teachers who do not practice and build successful experiences in the classroom will not have the opportunity to shift their mindsets and beliefs. 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 lead to the development of a community of responsibility among 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 4: Ensure the successful development of new special education teachers by providing mentorship and coaching for the first two years of their tenure***

Develop a more comprehensive and engaged support system for new special education teachers that includes coaching and mentors to provide ongoing support, written policies and procedures to identify what and how to do their job, and caseloads that are reasonable to allow for success as they build and grow their skills as a teacher. (See Theme 1, Recommendation 6 for additional resources)

## Resources for Theme 5

### School Climate and Culture Resources:

- The [National Center on Safe, Supportive Learning Environments](#) and their [Self-Assessment and Action Planner](#) provides data to assist leaders in knowing where to start building a positive school climate.
- The [Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements](#) brief.

### Social Emotional Learning Resources

- <https://school-connect.net/> School Connect is a Social Emotional Learning curriculum resource that is built primarily for high school students. It embeds SEL competencies into career development, post-secondary preparation, communication, and goal setting. This is a Tier 1 SEL resource, so it is recommended to be used with all students. However, it can be scaffolded and differentiated for a special education setting.
- <https://www.cccframework.org/resources/> The College and Career Competency Framework is also a Tier 1 framework focused on building social emotional learning competencies from a college and career preparation standpoint. It has a wide array of resources on each competency. These resources tend to work best when a team is involved in implementing it, such as a PLC.

### Equality/Disproportionality Resources:

- [Success Gaps Toolkit: Addressing Equity, Inclusion, and Opportunity](#) from the IDEA Data Center (IDC) which is a federally funded technical assistance center focused on improving the quality of IDEA Data.
- [Preventing Disproportionality by Strengthening District Policies and Procedures](#) from the former National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems.

### Professional Development and New Special Education Teacher Support Resources:

- [National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development](#) was funded by OSEP to improve teacher quality and increase commitment to teaching students with disabilities. Resources that can be found on this site include:
  - Sample District Induction Manual for supporting beginning special educators.
  - Mentor Handbook
- IRIS Center module on: [Teacher Induction: Providing Comprehensive Training for New Special Educators](#).
- Job-Embedded Professional Development Quick Guide on Making School Climate Improvements.

# Conclusion

According to Darling-Hammond et al., "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."<sup>21</sup> This report contains many recommendations, and it is certainly not possible to implement all of them within a short period of time. Instead, RSUSD 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, including periodic review to ensure that progress is being made.

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

**For an overall implementation process, see Appendix A.**

**For an UDL implementation plan, see Appendix B.**

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<sup>21</sup> Wei, 2009



# Appendix A: Suggestion for Implementing Recommendations

To execute the recommendations in this report, WestEd suggests RSUSD utilize a three-stage phase-in.

- **Stage 1: Preparation and exploration.** This stage is designed for the district to spend time thoughtfully planning and preparing for the implementation of what it views as priorities through a well-designed action plan. In addition, the district should spend time building a foundation of relationships and transparency with stakeholders during this stage.
- **Stage II: Installation.** In this stage, the district works to solidify policies, procedures, dissemination methods, and the rollout of district wide initiatives.
- **Stage III: Implementation.** Finally, the district implements the action plan it has prepared. It is vital that the district collect data from the onset of new initiatives in order to facilitate continuous improvement and sustainability of initiatives and to positively impact culture and climate.

Key to the overall success of implementing recommendations is a focus on the effectiveness of two-way communication processes, the level of support from district to site, relationship-building based on trust, and visible adjustments based on data collection and the communication of needs.

The following table outlines a suggested implementation plan for planning, implementing, and sustaining the recommended changes to the overall program.

**Stage I  
Preparation and  
Exploration**

**Special education finance and resource planning**

- Determine funding priorities through stakeholder input.
- Develop a separate special education budget to determine exact amounts going to different sources.
- Develop a system for comparing resources to numbers and needs of students with disabilities by site.
- Create a system for transparency of resource planning.

**District MTSS leadership team**

- Determine stakeholders to be included on the Multi-Tiered System of Supports leadership team.
- Complete an MTSS foundational assessment.
- Develop purposes, roles, and responsibilities.
- Identify a structure, a process, materials, and accountability tools.
- Define outcomes, a communication strategy, and a data collection process (e.g., what and how academic, behavioral, and discipline data is collected).
- Define timelines and actions.

**Special education district improvement team**

- Determine stakeholders to be included on the team.
- Develop mission, vision, values, and goals for special education.
- Disproportionality data analysis and Success Gap toolkit implementation.

### *Handbook development*

- Collect information on the current status of policies and procedures for the development of a handbook.
- Review and analyze the handbook for completeness and identify outdated topics and new topics to be included.
- Gather examples of policies and procedures from other districts.
- Determine a communication path and a plan for keeping the handbook updated.
- Develop a release timeline.

### *Inclusive practices*

- Investigate inclusive practices through training.
- Identify current practices and their alignment with inclusive practices.
- Conduct focus walks/talks with districts that have experienced success with inclusive practices.
- Design a plan of action that includes outcomes, communication, training, and data collection.
- Develop timelines.

### **Communication**

- Identify ways (e.g., in person, electronically, via hard copy, via site visits) in which the district office currently communicates with sites, parents, and stakeholders (consider both one-way and two-way communication.)
- Identify ways in which sites communicate with staff, parents, and stakeholders.
- Identify ways in which staff communicate with parents and stakeholders.
- Determine areas in which communication can be aligned and in which opportunities can be created

to increase communication at all levels of the organization.

- Determine areas of communication in need of improvements, such as timeliness, content, and mode.
- Ensure all staff have access to electronic communication (e.g., computer, email accounts) and understand expectations for checking and responding to communication.
- Explore possible causes for lack of timely communication and plan for retraining as needed.

#### **Professional development**

- Review district wide professional development for all personnel, including administrators, teachers, instructional aides, bus drivers, yard duty workers, new staff, and parents.
- Identify common professional development themes as well as gaps in professional development opportunities provided.
- Identify topics specific to staff and parents.
- Identify topics all stakeholders need training on.
- Align training topics to the district's mission and to a strategic plan that includes all student populations.
- Design stakeholder survey in order to determine priority areas for professional development.
- Identify various forms of available professional development (e.g., webinars, conferences), including organizations that may support RSUSD's professional development plan.
- Communicate and advertise professional development opportunities across stakeholder groups.

	<p><b>Multilingual learner instruction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify current policies and procedures for identifying multilingual learners suspected of having a disability.</li> <li>• Establish policies and procedures for determining language acquisition versus disabilities.</li> <li>• Identify staff needs in developing IEPs for multilingual learners.</li> <li>• Design targeted professional development that differentiates English language acquisition and disability.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage II Installation</b></p>	<p><b>District MTSS Teams</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plan and designate dates for a district-wide MTSS institute in which district and site staff can analyze data and determine priorities. Much of the information collected in this process may be used to refine and inform the district wide professional development plan.</li> </ul> <p><b>District wide policies and procedures</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select the individuals who will support the development of updated policies and procedures by determining the amount of time needed and dates to meet and by providing updates and outcomes (e.g., communication, number of staff per school site, professional development).</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication and collaboration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine ways in which communication expectations will be disseminated to stakeholders (i.e., what will be communicated, how will it be communicated, and by when it will be communicated), and determine accountability measures.</li> </ul> <p><b>Professional development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboratively schedule professional development that involves the elementary, secondary,</li> </ul>

	<p>curriculum and instruction, multilingual learner instruction, and special education departments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine an information dissemination process.</li> <li>• Ensure professional development is inclusive and comprehensive and includes not only teachers but also bus drivers, yard supervisors, new staff, instructional aides, and so on.</li> <li>• Develop a district wide professional development evaluation form to determine the effectiveness of training for participants <i>and</i> facilitators.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stage III Implementation</b></p>	<p><b>District MTSS Implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate a district-wide MTSS institute with representative district and site staff and relevant stakeholders.</li> <li>• Determine district MTSS leadership meeting dates and a process for analyzing information collected during the MTSS institute.</li> <li>• Plan for the analysis and release of aligned next steps and an action plan to district stakeholders.</li> </ul> <p><b>District-Wide Policies and Procedures</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete and disseminate policies and procedures.</li> <li>• Ensure training for staff is included in a professional development plan.</li> <li>• Determine which learning components are relevant to staff beyond special education.</li> </ul> <p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disseminate a communication plan and expectations.</li> <li>• Assist staff in understanding the importance of timely and effective communication/collaboration, which may be a component of the district wide professional development plan.</li> </ul>

	<p><b>Professional development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Disseminate an aligned, inclusive, and comprehensive professional development plan that includes topics, speakers, participants, dates, registration steps, and compensation (e.g., hours, mileage).</li><li>• Use evaluation data to review, adjust, and plan future training and professional development.</li></ul>
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# Appendix B: Multi-Tiered System of Supports Implementation Plan

## Recommendations for Implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support

The district's goal for this study is to understand how to best improve overall organizational and programmatic capacity in order to support the progress of students with disabilities efficiently and effectively. WestEd's approach to reviewing the special education program is drawn from research on systems thinking, organizational development, transformational leadership and instructional practices, and school system structures designed to support all learners.

## Understanding the Foundation of MTSS and the Intersection of Special Education

Prior to implementing a MTSS, the district must first understand MTSS and the intersection of special education based on the local context of the district. An essential component of developing the system is to understand the capacity and experience of all staff in being able to successfully implement the process. It is essential that as the district initiates an MTSS, all staff play pivotal roles in all aspects. Several resources exist that support the implementation of an MTSS. The following is a compilation of those resources to guide the district through the process.

1. **Preparation and Exploration Stage:** Immediate and initial actions to begin the process of implementation
  - 1.1 **District MTSS implementation leadership team**
    - 1.1.1 Determine stakeholders to be included on the MTSS implementation leadership team.
    - 1.1.2 Develop purpose, roles, and responsibilities aligned to the district's vision, strategic plan, and district and school improvement plans.
    - 1.1.3 Identify structure, process, materials, and accountability tools.



- 1.1.4 Define outcomes, a communication strategy, and a data collection process (e.g., what, and how academic, behavioral, and discipline data is collected).
- 1.1.5 Define a district wide system for academic, social-emotional, and behavioral interventions and supports for all struggling learners.
- 1.1.6 Conduct the MTSS needs assessment to identify specific areas of need and linkages to key district initiatives.
- 1.1.7 Define timelines and actions.

## 1.2 Refinement of district wide policies and procedures

- 1.2.1 Identify district and special education staff who will assist with the development of updated policies and procedures.
- 1.2.2 Collect information on the current status of policies and procedures.
- 1.2.3 Review and analyze current policies and procedures for completeness and identify outdated topics and new topics to be included.
- 1.2.4 Gather examples of policies and procedures from other districts for comparison.
- 1.2.5 Determine a process for feedback on needed changes.
- 1.2.6 Determine how training will take place and determine a process for communication and monitoring of appropriate use.
- 1.2.7 Develop key messages and expectations regarding staff knowledge and the use of updated policies and procedures.
- 1.2.8 Establish a process for updating and maintaining.

## 1.3 Communication

- 1.3.1 Identify ways (e.g., in person, electronically, via hard copy, via site visits) in which the district office currently communicates with sites, parents, and stakeholders (consider both one-way and two-way communication).
- 1.3.2 Identify ways in which sites communicate with staff, parents, and stakeholders.
- 1.3.3 Identify ways in which staff communicate with parents and stakeholders.

- 1.3.4 Determine areas in which communication can be aligned and in which opportunities can be created to increase communication at all levels of the organization.
- 1.3.5 Explore possible causes for lack of timely communication.
- 1.3.6 Determine areas of communication in need of improvement, such as timeliness, content, and mode.
- 1.3.7 Ensure all staff have access to electronic communication (e.g., computer, email accounts) and understand expectations for checking and responding to communication.
- 1.3.8 Develop ongoing processes for communication, feedback, and alignment with general education processes.

#### 1.4 Professional development

- 1.4.1 Review district wide professional development for all personnel, including administrators, teachers, instructional aides, bus drivers, yard duty workers, new staff, and parents.
- 1.4.2 Identify common professional development themes as well as gaps in professional development opportunities provided.
- 1.4.3 Identify topics specific to staff and parents.
- 1.4.4 Identify topics all stakeholders need training on.
- 1.4.5 Align training topics to the district's mission and to a strategic plan that includes all student populations.
- 1.4.6 Design a stakeholder survey in order to determine priority areas for professional development.
- 1.4.7 Identify various forms of available professional development (e.g., webinars, conferences), including organizations that may support RSUSD's professional development plan.
- 1.4.8 Communicate and advertise professional development opportunities across stakeholder groups.

## 2. Initial Implementation Stage: Planning stage for the development of site teams and alignment of the site planning process to district plan

### 2.1 District MTSS teams

- 2.1.1 Plan and designate dates for a district wide MTSS institute in which district and site staff can analyze data and determine priorities by using the MTSS needs assessment. Much of the

information collected in this process may be used to refine and inform the district wide professional development plan.

## 2.2 Refinement of district wide policies and procedures

2.2.1 Select the individuals who will support the development of updated policies and procedures by determining the amount of time needed and dates to meet and by providing updates and outcomes (e.g., communication, number of staff per school site, professional development).

## 2.3 Communication and collaboration

2.3.1 Determine ways in which communication expectations will be disseminated to stakeholders (i.e., what will be communicated, how will it be communicated, and by when will it be communicated), and determine accountability measures.

## 2.4 Professional development

2.4.1 Collaboratively schedule professional development that involves the elementary, secondary, curriculum and instruction, and special education departments.

2.4.2 Determine an information dissemination process.

2.4.3 Ensure professional development is inclusive and comprehensive and includes not only teachers but also bus drivers, yard supervisors, new staff, instructional aides, and so on.

2.4.4 Develop a district wide professional development evaluation form to determine the effectiveness of training for participants *and* facilitators.

2.4.5 Define a cancellation policy and an efficient method for collecting data about training, including the number of canceled trainings, the effectiveness of training, accountability measures, and expectations regarding data use for planning future training.

## 3. Full Implementation Stage: Implementation of action plans and development of feedback cycles to review data and make adjustments

### 3.1 District MTSS

3.1.1 Facilitate the district wide MTSS institute with representative district and site staff and relevant stakeholders.

- 3.1.2 Determine district MTSS leadership meeting dates and a process for analyzing information collected during the MTSS institute.
  - 3.1.3 Plan for the analysis and release of aligned next steps and an action plan to district stakeholders.
- 3.2 District wide policies and procedures**
- 3.2.1 Complete and disseminate policies and procedures.
  - 3.2.2 Ensure training for staff is included in the professional development plan.
  - 3.2.3 Determine which learning components are relevant to staff beyond special education (e.g., RtI2, or response to instruction and intervention).
- 3.3 Communication**
- 3.3.1 Disseminate a communication plan and expectations.
  - 3.3.2 Assist staff in understanding the importance of timely and effective communication/collaboration, which may be a component of the district wide professional development plan.
- 3.4 Professional development**
- 3.4.1 Disseminate an aligned, inclusive, and comprehensive professional development plan that includes topics, speakers, participants, dates, registration steps, and compensation (e.g., hours, mileage).
  - 3.4.2 Use evaluation data to review, adjust, and plan future training and professional development.

For each area of this MTSS implementation plan, data collection must be addressed from the onset to maintain, continuously improve, and sustain initiatives and to positively impact culture and climate. Additionally, a focus on the effectiveness of two-way communication processes, the level of support from district to site, relationship-building based on trust, and visible adjustments based on the communication of needs and data collection is necessary.

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