

Special Education Review

February 26, 2024

Budget

Amount	Details	Month	Amount
4,500	Mid Year Bonus	June	2,000
2,500	Year End Bonus	December	3,000
		January	5,000

Costs	Expenditure	Month	Amount
2,300	November vacation	November	450
600	Home for the holidays	December	600
350	Gifts for family	July	300
60	Family vacation	January	880
		January	
		January	
		January	

Annual Budget by Month		
April	May	June
9,915	13,220	16,000
	7,000	7,000
	0	

Bellflower Unified School District

Michael H. Fine
Chief Executive Officer

February 26, 2024

Lisa Azevedo, Interim Superintendent
Bellflower Unified School District
9301 Flower St.
Bellflower, CA 90706

Dear Superintendent Azevedo:

In June 2023, the Bellflower Unified School District and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) entered into an agreement for FCMAT to conduct a review of the district's special education program. The agreement stated that FCMAT would perform the following:

1. Review the district's implementation of student success teams, multitiered system of supports, and response to intervention, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
2. Review the district's system of referral and evaluation for special education, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
3. Analyze special education teacher staffing ratios and class and caseload sizes using statutory requirements for mandated services and statewide guidelines, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
4. Review the efficiency of staffing allocations of special education paraeducators per Education Code requirements and/or industry standards, and make recommendations for improvement, if any. Review the procedures for identifying the need for paraeducators, including least restrictive environment (LRE), and the processes for monitoring the assignment of paraeducators and determining the need for continued support from year to year (include classroom and 1-to-1 paraeducators), and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
5. Analyze staffing and caseloads for related service providers, including but not limited to speech pathologists, psychologists, occupational/physical therapists, behavior specialists, adaptive physical education teachers and other staff who may be related services providers, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
6. Determine whether the district overidentifies students for special education services compared to the statewide and countywide averages, and make recommendations that will reduce overidentification, if needed.
7. Analyze whether the district provides a continuum of special education and related services for students from preschool through age 22, including placements in the least restrictive environment, and make recommendations for improvement (which may include instructional models), if any.

8. Review the organizational structure and staffing of the special education department in the district's central office to determine whether administration, clerical and administrative support, program specialists, teachers on special assignments and overall functionality are aligned with those of districts of comparable size and structure, and make recommendations for greater efficiencies, if needed.
9. Review the costs of due process, mediations and settlements for the past three years and make recommendations for improvements, if any.
10. Review the district's professional development/training program as it relates to special education, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.

This final report contains the study team's findings and recommendations.

FCMAT appreciates the opportunity to serve the Bellflower Unified School District and extends its thanks to all the staff for their assistance during fieldwork.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael H. Fine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael H. Fine
Chief Executive Officer

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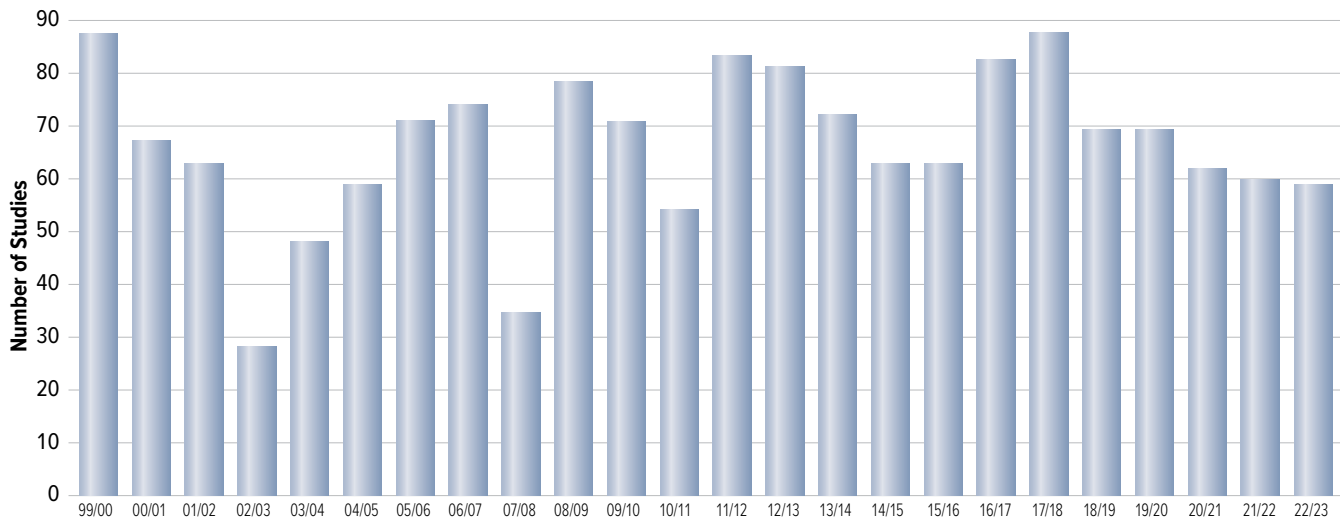
About FCMAT

FCMAT’s primary mission is to assist California’s local TK-14 educational agencies to identify, prevent, and resolve financial, human resources and data management challenges. FCMAT provides fiscal and data management assistance, professional development training, product development and other related school business and data services. FCMAT’s fiscal and management assistance services are used not just to help avert fiscal crisis, but to promote sound financial practices, support the training and development of chief business officials and help to create efficient organizational operations. FCMAT’s data management services are used to help local educational agencies (LEAs) meet state reporting responsibilities, improve data quality, and inform instructional program decisions.

FCMAT may be requested to provide fiscal crisis or management assistance by a school district, charter school, community college, county office of education, the state superintendent of public instruction, or the Legislature.

When a request or assignment is received, FCMAT assembles a study team that works closely with the LEA to define the scope of work, conduct on-site fieldwork and provide a written report with findings and recommendations to help resolve issues, overcome challenges and plan for the future.

Studies by Fiscal Year



FCMAT has continued to make adjustments in the types of support provided based on the changing dynamics of TK-14 LEAs and the implementation of major educational reforms. FCMAT also develops and provides numerous publications, software tools, workshops and professional learning opportunities to help LEAs operate more effectively and fulfill their fiscal oversight and data management responsibilities. The California School Information Services (CSIS) division of FCMAT assists the California Department of Education with the implementation of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). CSIS also hosts and maintains the Ed-Data website (www.ed-data.org) and provides technical expertise to the Ed-Data partnership: the California Department of Education, EdSource and FCMAT.

FCMAT was created by Assembly Bill (AB) 1200 in 1991 to assist LEAs to meet and sustain their financial obligations. AB 107 in 1997 charged FCMAT with responsibility for CSIS and its statewide data management work. AB 1115 in 1999 codified CSIS’ mission.

AB 1200 is also a statewide plan for county offices of education and school districts to work together locally to improve fiscal procedures and accountability standards. AB 2756 (2004) provides specific responsibilities to FCMAT with regard to districts that have received emergency state loans.

In January 2006, Senate Bill 430 (charter schools) and AB 1366 (community colleges) became law and expanded FCMAT's services to those types of LEAs.

On September 17, 2018 AB 1840 was signed into law. This legislation changed how fiscally insolvent districts are administered once an emergency appropriation has been made, shifting the former state-centric system to be more consistent with the principles of local control, and providing new responsibilities to FCMAT associated with the process.

Since 1992, FCMAT has been engaged to perform more than 1,400 reviews for LEAs, including school districts, county offices of education, charter schools and community colleges. The Kern County Superintendent of Schools is the administrative agent for FCMAT. The team is led by Michael H. Fine, Chief Executive Officer, with funding derived through appropriations in the state budget and a modest fee schedule for charges to requesting agencies.

Introduction

Background

Located in Los Angeles County, the Bellflower Unified School District is governed by a five-member board and serves students residing in the city of Bellflower as well as certain students in the cities of Cerritos and Lakewood. According to [DataQuest](#), the district enrolled a total of 9,989 students from kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) during the 2022-23 academic year. The district operates 10 elementary schools, two grades 7-12 secondary schools, one continuation high school, one independent study academy, and one community day school. It is a member of the Mid-Cities Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), which is a regional service delivery model for special education. In 2022-23, according to [DataQuest](#), 15.44% of the district's K-12 students were identified as requiring special education, which was more than the statewide noncharter school average of 13.23%.

In June 2023, the district and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) entered into an agreement for FCMAT to conduct a review of the district's special education program.

Study and Report Guidelines

FCMAT visited the district on November 2 and 3, 2023 to conduct interviews with district and school administrators, special education teachers, related service providers, and other support staff. Following fieldwork, FCMAT reviewed and analyzed data and documents. This report is the result of those activities.

FCMAT's reports focus on systems and processes that may need improvement. Those that may be functioning well are generally not commented on in FCMAT's reports. In writing its reports, FCMAT uses the Associated Press Stylebook, a comprehensive guide to usage and accepted style that emphasizes conciseness and clarity. In addition, this guide emphasizes plain language, discourages the use of jargon and capitalizes relatively few terms.

Study Team

The study team was composed of the following members:

Carolynne Beno, Ed.D., CFE
FCMAT Intervention Specialist

Colleen Patterson, MBA, CMA
FCMAT Consultant

John Lotze
FCMAT Technical Writer

Those members of this study team who are otherwise employed by a local educational agency (LEA) were not representing their respective employers but were working solely as independent contractors for FCMAT.

All team members reviewed the draft report to confirm accuracy and achieve consensus on the final recommendations.

Executive Summary

Special Education Department

The district's Special Education Department does not have a mission or vision statement, and many staff reported that its goals, policies and procedures are unclear. The district has had two special education directors in the past two years, and there has been a significant turnover in leadership positions in the Special Education Department, which staff attributed to a lack of department policies and procedures and increasing workload. The Special Education Department should establish and communicate its policies and procedures, develop a mission and vision statement, and create goals so staff can work in a coordinated and strategic manner to achieve specific objectives.

FCMAT compared Bellflower Unified's Special Education Department central office staffing with that of eight other districts that have student enrollment and unduplicated pupil percentages¹ (UPPs) similar to that of Bellflower Unified. Bellflower Unified aligns closely with the comparison districts in the number of administrative support positions that directly support special education in the central office. However, there is a critical need to repurpose one of the clerical positions in the Special Education Department to have a clerical position dedicated to managing the special education information system and developing data governance systems to improve the accuracy and availability of data. Currently, the Educational Services Department's executive secretary performs these duties. Because of increasingly complex California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) reporting requirements and the importance of regular auditing and correction of district special education data, the lack of a clerical position focused on the special education information system in the Special Education Department means the district is not dedicating enough administrative support to its data governance systems to ensure special education data is accurate.

Professional Development

The district has historically offered optional, paid professional learning outside of school hours, but staff reported that trainings are not well attended; consequently, staff in many job categories have unmet training needs. At the time of interviews, the district was negotiating to add six staff development days to its calendar, which are needed to build systems and establish standard operating procedures. The district should prioritize professional learning for its instructional staff that is aligned with the 2015 statewide task force report titled *One System: Reforming Education to Serve ALL Students*, such as universal design for learning (UDL) and multitiered system of supports (MTSS), on the six staff development days being negotiated.

District Special Education Enrollment

In 2022-23, 15.44% of the district's K-12 students were identified as requiring special education. This percentage is higher than both the countywide and statewide averages for K-12 students, and it had increased by 2.39 percentage points between 2018-19 and 2022-23. The district's increasing percentage of students in special education is influenced by its implementation of student study teams (SSTs) and its MTSS.

During interviews, staff explained that the SST processes at certain schools have historically served as a pathway to a special education assessment instead of an opportunity for a student to receive tiered interventions in general education. Although the district has articulated clear intervention steps and provided training, some schools reportedly skip interventions and move directly to a special education assessment, particularly if a student has behavioral support needs. The district recently revised its SST process to improve consistency of implementation by requiring schools to document academic intervention plans

¹ Unduplicated pupils are those who are English learners, foster youth, or eligible for free or reduced-price meals. No student is counted twice, even if they are in more than one of these categories.

(AIPs) and SSTs in the intervention screen so data can be queried and reviewed. The district is performing an initial analysis of these new processes using AIP and SST data and will provide follow-up training as needed.

The district has defined tiers of academic support and has numerous resources available, but most staff reported that these tiered academic interventions are not implemented as intended at all district schools. Although all schools received training on the tiered academic interventions during their professional learning community collaboration time, a lack of professional learning time to provide follow-up training or inadequate accountability for the implementation of academic interventions may be contributing to this practice. This means that only some students are receiving academic intervention in general education before being referred for a special education assessment.

Staff reported that district schools have received positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) training, adopted curricula to address social-emotional development, and have invested in staff such as general education behavior aides and counselors to support students' behavioral and social-emotional needs.

Special Education Staffing

FCMAT analyzed special education staffing for special education teachers, special education instructional assistants, and related service providers using statewide guidelines and industry standards. Staffing for special education teachers was within industry standards. Staffing for related service providers was within industry standards except for credentialed school nurses and speech and language pathologists (SLPs). The district should consider adding at least 1.0 FTE credentialed school nurse to better align with industry standards and meet students' needs. Further analysis of the district's caseload data for SLPs is needed to determine how many students are receiving a direct service, then the district should reevaluate SLP staffing to ensure it is aligned with Education Code (EC) 56363.3 and 56441.7(a) and meets students' needs.

District data indicates it has 71 district-employed special education instructional assistants, as well as an unknown number of contracted instructional assistants. Staff reported that the district has filled many positions with contracted nonpublic agency staff but did not provide data on the number or FTE equivalent of contracted staff. The district's practice has been to hire two three-hour special education instructional assistants to fill one six-hour position. This is not the industry standard and, based on what FCMAT observes across the state, the district would benefit from offering six-hour special education instructional assistant positions. This would help it recruit and retain district employees, which would reduce its reliance on contracting with costly nonpublic agencies and improve service to students.

Cost of Due Process, Mediations and Settlements

It is best practice to use alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to settle special education disputes informally, early, and at the lowest level possible. Office of Administrative Hearing (OAH) data indicates the district is settling more of its cases in prehearing conferences or mediations than at a formal hearing. The SELPA has a grant to offer ADR training, which the district participates in. Although the district has provided training for staff who serve in the role of administrative designee at individualized education program (IEP) meetings, most staff interviewed indicated they have not received adequate training to discern whether an IEP complies with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements. In addition, many districts use an IEP compliance checklist to help teachers and administrative designees improve the legal compliance of its IEPs, but the district does not. The district should prioritize training for any staff members who serve as administrative designees and address IEP compliance with IDEA requirements, and it should begin monitoring IEPs using an IEP compliance checklist.

Findings and Recommendations

Background and Context – Transforming Education to Improve Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

Over the past two decades, education reform movements emphasizing accountability have highlighted achievement gaps among students based on factors such as race and ethnicity, family income, language ability, and disability. Although California has made some progress in reducing inequities in educational outcomes for these student groups, those with disabilities remain among the lowest-performing subgroups.

In 2013, California convened a statewide special education task force dedicated to ending persistent poor outcomes for California's students with disabilities, including infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and students up to age 22. The task force's purpose was to study the complex systems designed to serve students with disabilities and to forward recommendations to the State Board of Education, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing, and the California Department of Education (CDE). In March 2015, the task force published *One System: Reforming Education to Serve All Students*, Report of California's Statewide Task Force on Special Education, as well as an executive summary.

The *Statewide Special Education Task Force Project Summary* (project summary) stated:

California's current policies, including funding, credentialing, and a range of service delivery options, tend to 'bolt on' special education to general education. While there are certainly examples throughout the state of well-integrated models of supports, these are the exceptions rather than the norm. Our prevailing model has made it acceptable, and in some instances seem desirable, to isolate special education as a unique and separate system that parallels general education.

This project summary explained that operating special education as a separate program is contrary to current research that suggests:

Inclusive practices, integrated systems, and coherence are essential to provide high-quality, cost-effective special education programs within (rather than apart from) a well-articulated system of education.

The 2015 report on one system identified the following seven distinct and interconnected areas of focus to improve outcomes for students with disabilities:

1. Early learning.
2. Evidence-based school and classroom practices.
3. Educator preparation and professional learning.
4. Assessment.
5. Accountability.
6. Family and student engagement.
7. Special education financing.

Among the areas of focus and many recommendations in the 2015 report on one system was the predominant theme that California’s special education system would improve if one coherent system were designed in which general education and special education work together to meet the needs of all students. The report explained:

In a coherent system of education, all children and students with disabilities are considered general education students first; and all educators, regardless of which students they are assigned to serve, have a collective responsibility to see that all children receive the education and the supports they need to maximize their development and potential, allowing them to participate meaningfully in the nation’s economy and democracy.

The project summary identified a need to transform the understanding of special education from:

[A] place where students go to receive more or different services, to a viewpoint that includes special education services as one of many programs of support under the umbrella of general education.

In 2020, the CDE assigned WestEd to report on policy and system changes that have affected students with disabilities since the 2015 report on one system. The 2021 WestEd report, *California’s Progress Toward Achieving ONE SYSTEM: Reforming Education to Serve All Students*, explains that the 2015 report on one system was intended to create momentum and discourse in California’s efforts to reform special education. To evaluate these efforts, WestEd examined the 2015 report on one system’s seven focus areas and then made additional recommendations in each area. WestEd concluded, “numerous improvements have been made to California’s general and special education landscapes.”

Using the 2015 report on one system and the 2021 WestEd report as guides, districts will need to focus on coherence, inclusive practices, and integrated systems to develop a comprehensive system of education that supports positive outcomes for all students. Districts need to recognize that students who receive special education services are general education students first and need to operate with the understanding that special education services are one of the many programs of support under general education rather than a place where students go to receive more or different services. These tenets will be used throughout this report to analyze the district’s organization, staffing, continuum of service options, and practices, and to inform current recommendations for improvement.

District Organization and Central Office Special Education Staffing

The organizational structure of a district and how it staffs special education at its central office play crucial roles in shaping the effectiveness of its special education program. A district needs to be organized to foster effective communication and collaboration among departments in its central office and with its schools. This collaboration is necessary to address the unique needs of students with disabilities and to implement evidence-based practices that promote inclusive education.

District Organization

A simplified version of the district’s organizational chart is shown below. The director of special education reports to the assistant superintendent, educational services, which is a typical structure in comparably-sized districts.

Simplified District Organizational Chart, 2023-24

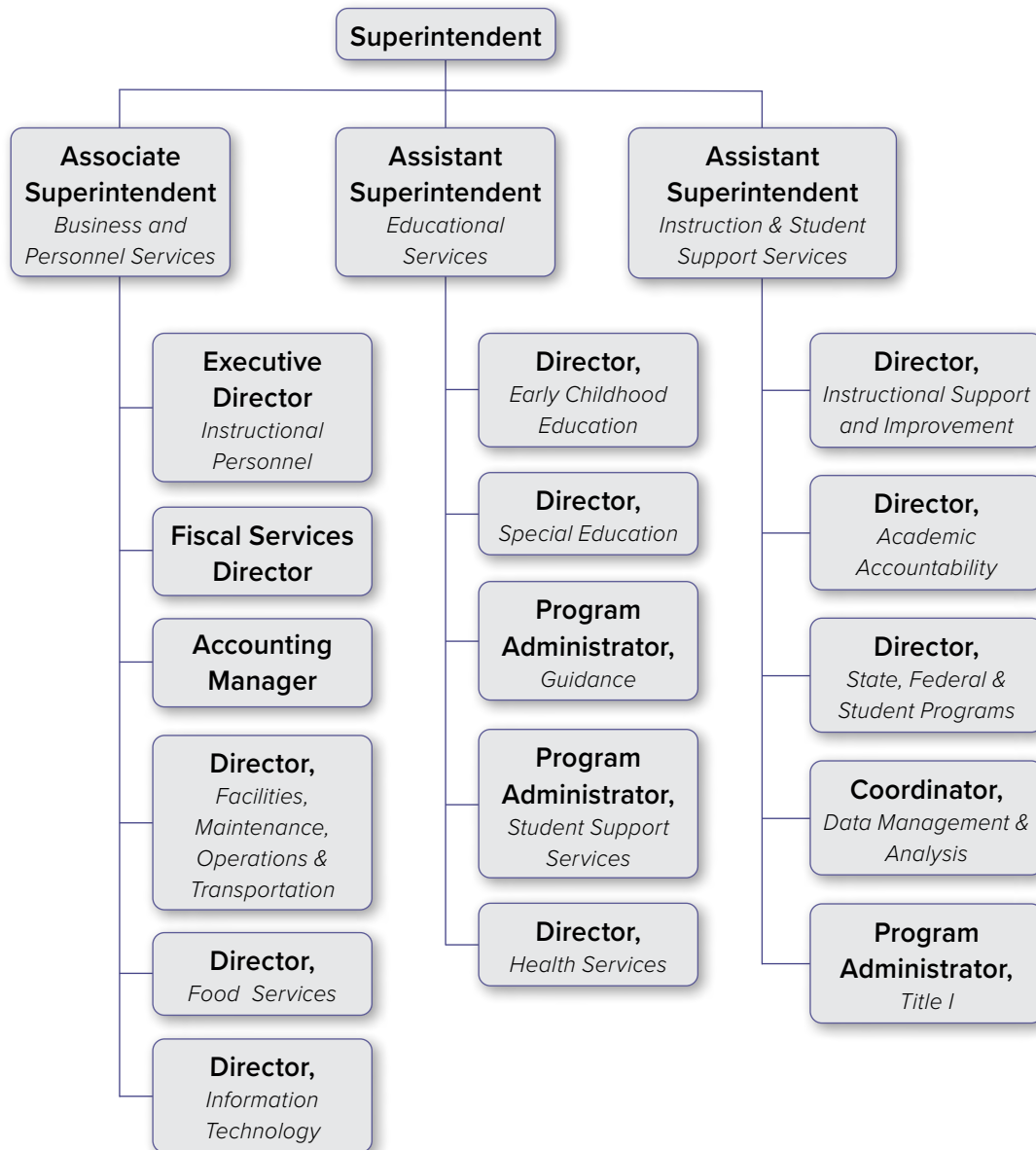


Figure 1. A simplified version of the district's organizational chart that shows the major departments.

Source: District.

To develop well-integrated models of support for students with disabilities, the 2015 report on one system cautions districts to avoid isolating special education as a separate system and recommends that districts focus on collaboration between special education and general education staff. The district's director of special education meets weekly and collaborates frequently with the assistant superintendent of educational services. The special education department collaborates with other departments and designates department representatives to work on special projects in other departments.

District Mission, Vision and Priorities

The district's mission and vision statements articulate its purpose.

- Mission - "We build futures for our students by providing a pathway for all students to become responsible, informed, productive citizens who can compete in a diverse world."
- Vision - "The Bellflower Unified School District produces graduates who are globally competitive learners. Through equitable access to high quality academic, social, and applied learning, students are ready to excel in college, careers, and life."

California school districts are required to prepare a three-year, public Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) each year that defines a district's goals and priorities. The LCAP identifies successes and needs among student groups and reports what the district will do to support positive student outcomes. According to the district's 2023-24 LCAP, the district's core values are equity, achievement, and community building, and it identifies nine initiatives deemed critical to supporting student success. Among those, the three initiatives below are directly aligned with the 2015 report on one system:

- Continued development of MTSS and UDL to provide cohesive intervention and acceleration to meet student needs.
- Academic intervention through RTI at all schools.
- Increased attendance and school safety through implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

The 2023-24 LCAP identifies improving the academic achievement of students with disabilities as a focus area.

Special Education Department Mission, Vision and Priorities

The best practice is for a special education department to adopt mission and vision statements, as well as specific goals with action steps to support positive outcomes for students with disabilities. The Special Education Department does not have a mission or vision statement, and many staff reported its goals are unclear. In addition, staff interviewed could not explain how their work was supporting the district's mission, vision or priorities. Staff turnover in district and Special Education Department leadership positions may be contributing to the department's lack of a mission or vision statement and clear goals. The Special Education Department needs to develop a mission and vision statement, and goals, so staff can work in a coordinated and strategic manner to achieve specific objectives and understand how their work supports students with disabilities and is connected to the district's purpose and priorities. Special education department mission, vision and purpose statements that are congruent with the 2015 report on one system often address the following:

- Collaboration among general education and special education staff to improve student achievement.
- Accurate identification of students for special education.
- Inclusive practices and access to general education learning environments to the maximum extent possible and appropriate.
- Use of evidence-based practices in rigorous academic programs that support high achievement so all students can reach their highest possible standard of achievement.
- Appropriate supports designed to meet a student's unique needs.
- Preparation for post-secondary opportunities and a successful adult life.

Central Office Special Education Staffing

Central Office Administrator and Leadership Positions

The Special Education Department has 6.50 FTE administrator and leadership positions in the central office, as shown below.

Special Education Administrative and Leadership Positions

Position Title	Number of Positions	Total FTE
Director	1	1.00
Program Administrator	5	5.00
Program Administrator/Service Provider	1	0.50
Total	7	6.50

Source: District-provided data.

Note: Staff reported that the program administrator/service provider position is intended to be a 50% program administrator (serving as lead psychologist and administrative designee for students receiving home/hospital instruction) and 50% service provider (performing educationally-related mental health assessments).

Staff reported high turnover in all special education administrative and leadership positions during the past several years because of the heavy workload, inadequate communication, training and support, and a lack of clear systems, processes, and procedures in the Special Education Department. Many staff reported that program administrators have left their positions because they were tasked with solving problems independently without support or clear processes and procedures. This is in part because the district has had two different special education directors in the past two years.

Central Office Administrative Support Positions

The Special Education Department has 4.00 FTE administrative support staff, as shown below.

Special Education Administrative Support Staffing

Position Title	Number of Positions	Total FTE
Secretary	4	4.00

Source: District.

Note: In addition to the staff identified in the table above, the executive secretary in the Educational Services Department helps the Special Education Department with the special education information system and budget development and monitoring.

There are four secretarial positions, and one of the positions has had constant turnover in the last couple of years. This has caused duties in the office to be handled by others and created the need to change duties, which results in lack of stability and lack of staff being able to develop expertise in their assigned duties. All staff reported that the special education secretaries' workload is high because of factors such as the atypically large number of contracts with nonpublic agencies and employee onboarding support needs driven by high turnover in many special education positions.

The industry standard is for a district to have at least one administrative support position in its special education department dedicated to performing technical duties related to student and special education information systems, and to generate reports to comply with state and federal requirements. Staff in these positions typically help and train special education teachers and other staff on data entry in the special education database system. Typical duties of a clerical staff member supporting the Special Education Information System (SEIS) include the following:

- Auditing data entry in the SEIS and identifying inaccurate codes, mismatches, duplicate files, and other missing or erroneous data.
- Working with case managers and other staff to obtain missing or corrected data.
- Running queries in database systems to create reports per state and federal reporting guidelines.
- Assigning caseloads, tracking IEP deadlines, and following up on past due evaluations and annual IEP meetings.
- Inputting data from IEPs into SEIS, the district student information system, and CALPADS.
- Serving as the SEIS system administrator to create, modify, and delete user accounts and passwords, setting appropriate access levels, and maintaining the SEIS user file with set permissions.
- Attending trainings and staying current with legislative and policy changes to ensure compliance with required data reporting, and following guidelines for data entry in CALPADS to ensure district compliance with state and federal special education reporting requirements.

The district does not have an administrative support position in its Special Education Department managing the SEIS. Based on what FCMAT observes across the state, most similarly-sized districts have at least a 1.0 FTE clerical position in the Special Education Department managing the SEIS. In the case of Bellflower Unified, the Educational Services Department's executive secretary performs these duties because the special education program has historically been part of this department. When the assistant superintendent of educational services provided direct oversight and support of the special education program in the past, that position's executive secretary may have been able to perform these duties. However, because of increasingly complex CALPADS reporting requirements, the importance of regular auditing and correction of district special education data, increasing special education enrollment, and the fact that the district has a director of special education, district SEIS management duties need to be under the direct oversight of the director of special education. The district's lack of a dedicated clerical staff member in its Special Education Department to manage SEIS means that it is not dedicating enough administrative support to its data governance systems to ensure special education data is accurate.

Special Education Central Office Staffing Comparison

FCMAT conducted an informal survey of eight unified school districts in California that have student enrollment and UPPs similar to those of Bellflower Unified. The survey focused on gathering information about each district's Special Education Department central office staffing in two areas:

1. Central office administrator and leadership positions, including positions such as directors, assistant directors, coordinators, program specialists, and teachers on special assignment (TOSAs). These positions do not require an administrative credential.
2. Central office administrative support positions, including positions such as secretaries, administrative assistants, filing clerks, and data technicians.

The table below compares Bellflower Unified's Special Education Department central office staffing to that of the eight districts that replied to FCMAT's survey. Among these comparison districts, the average number of administrator and leadership positions supporting special education in the central office is 5.88

FTE, whereas Bellflower Unified reports a slightly higher figure of 6.5 FTE. For special education administrative support positions in the central office, the average among comparison districts is 4.0 FTE; Bellflower Unified also has 4.0 FTE in this category.

Special Education Central Office Staffing Comparison

District	County	2021-22 Census Day Enrollment	2021-22 Census Day UPP%	2023-24 Administrator and Leadership Positions FTE	2023-24 Administrative Support Positions FTE
Marysville Joint Unified	Yuba	10,377	72.04%	4.0	3.5
Lucia Mar Unified	San Luis Obispo	9,591	60.24%	8.0	5.0
Lynwood Unified	Los Angeles	11,967	94.54%	8.0	7.0
Pittsburg Unified	Contra Costa	10,665	81.88%	5.0	3.5
San Lorenzo Unified	Alameda	8,624	76.62%	5.5	3.0
Upland Unified	San Bernardino	10,079	68.75%	4.0	4.0
Washington Unified	Yolo	8,194	61.08%	6.0	2.0
Woodland Joint Unified	Yolo	9,517	72.39%	6.5	4.0
Average FTE				5.88	4.00
Bellflower Unified	Los Angeles	9,989	79.92%	6.50	4.00

Sources: EdData - Comparisons (ed-data.org) and district-provided data in response to FCMAT survey.

Notes: Bellflower Unified was excluded when calculating average FTE.

TOSAs were included in administrator and leadership FTE if they performed special education program support functions in the central office.

Any variances in FTE are due to FCMAT’s interpretation of the information shared via survey.

Although Bellflower Unified has 0.62 FTE more special education administrator and leadership staff in its Special Education Department than the comparison districts, FCMAT does not recommend reducing special education administrator and leadership staffing. Maintaining current staffing levels will help support the development of Special Education Department goals, policies, procedures and systems.

Compared to districts of similar size, Bellflower Unified aligns closely in terms of the number of administrative support positions that directly support special education in the central office. However, there is a critical need to repurpose one of the clerical staff members in the Special Education Department to manage the special education information system and to develop data governance systems to improve the accuracy and availability of data.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Continue the regular communication and collaboration between the Special Education Department and other district departments, including Instruction and Student Support Services and Business and Personnel Services, to ensure shared ownership of the special education program and the inclusion of special education representatives in all district planning and decision making.
2. Form a special education task force composed of representatives from all education partner groups to create a mission and vision statement for the Special Education Department and recommendations that will lead to the development of a strategic plan with clear goals and action steps.

3. Repurpose one of the clerical positions in the Special Education Department to focus on managing the special education information system and data governance systems.

Continuum of Service Options

The IDEA establishes nationwide minimum standards for providing education services to children with disabilities, as well as related services for all eligible infants, toddlers, preschoolers and youth with disabilities up to age 22. It mandates that each state ensure availability of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for any child with a disability who needs special education and related services, regardless of whether they have failed or been retained in a course or grade, and even if they are advancing from grade to grade (Title 34, Section 300.101(c) of the Code of Federal Regulations — 34 CFR 300.101(c)).

FCMAT analyzed the district's special education continuum of services and the special education program's alignment with the 2015 report on one system.

Continuum of Services for Students Ages 3 to 5

The district offers self-contained classes for preschool-age students with mild to moderate or moderate to severe disabilities. These classes are noncategorical, meaning they serve students with a variety of disabilities. It also offers an autism-focused program for five-year-olds called NEST (Nurturing Emotional and Social Traits). Children who are enrolled in self-contained classes lack inclusive opportunities in general education settings and are given few opportunities to interact with neurotypical peers in the district's educational program.

The district provides an inclusive special education preschool opportunity through its State Preschool program for certain students so they have access to a general education classroom, general education teacher, and neurotypical peers. Students with disabilities in State Preschool program classes receive specialized support from an itinerant special education teacher and special education instructional assistant. These inclusive opportunities for preschool-age students with disabilities are positive and strongly aligned with the 2015 report on one system.

Continuum of Services for School-Age Students

Students with mild to moderate disabilities access specialized academic instruction and related services, such as speech and language therapy, adapted physical education (APE), and occupational therapy (OT), in a general education classroom or in a separate setting. Although many districts across the state have reduced or phased out self-contained special day class (SDC) programs for students with mild to moderate disabilities to maximize access to general education, the district continues to offer this type of SDC.

Districts that have reduced enrollment in SDCs for students with mild to moderate disabilities often do so by implementing coteaching programs. Coteaching offers targeted support for students with disabilities in inclusive general education settings. Empirical studies of inclusive classrooms, where general education and special education teachers collaborate in instruction, indicate improved learning outcomes for students with learning disabilities. These findings are discussed in the 2010 report, *Co-Teaching in Urban Secondary School Districts to Meet the Needs of All Teachers and Learners* (Cramer, E., Liston, A., Nevin, A., & Thousand, J. (2010). *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 6(2), 59-76).

Staff reported that the elementary schools do not use coteaching; rather, they provide specialized academic instruction through push-in services (delivered in a student's general education classroom, targeting goals alongside their everyday lessons) or pull-out services (delivered outside of the student's general education classroom using 1-to-1 or small group instruction). Staff reported that coteaching is the intended support model at the secondary schools and that instructional delivery training has been provided for

coteaching teams. In addition, school administrators have received training on master scheduling practices to support coteaching. Although robust training for coteaching has taken place, staff reported that certain teachers are not using the instructional delivery models they were trained in, and in some cases the special education teacher functions as an instructional aide in general education classrooms, not as a co-teacher. Improving the effectiveness of special education co-teachers is hindered by a lack of common planning time for coteaching teams across the district. As a result, some teachers are not proactively planning for the needs of different learners or developing a shared understanding of the curriculum and instructional delivery plan.

Staff also reported that some district educators believe students with disabilities who are enrolled in SDCs for students with mild to moderate disabilities are best served in those programs, not in cotaught general education classrooms. However, this belief contradicts the findings in the 2015 report on one system, which explains that the performance and outcomes of students with disabilities improve with increased access to general education settings. Establishing common planning time for co-teachers could increase the access students with disabilities have to general education settings by improving the instruction and support offered there.

The district offers one type of specialized SDC, the BEST (Behavior Emotional Social Teaching) program, to support the needs of students who qualify for special education under the category of emotional disturbance. This program is based on general education curriculum standards and focuses on social-emotional learning and behavioral support in a therapy-enriched environment.

District students with moderate to severe disabilities have access to noncategorical self-contained SDCs that provide an alternate curriculum, alternate state testing, behavior supports, and a functional skills curriculum. This curriculum focuses on self-help skills, independent living, prevocational training, and community-based instruction.

Least Restrictive Environment

The IDEA requires that students with disabilities be offered a FAPE and be educated in the LRE. To determine the appropriate setting for an individual student, their IEP team reviews the student's strengths and needs and considers the educational benefit of placement in different educational settings. The assessment of LRE placement is conducted using the CDE's local-level annual performance report. These reports, required by the IDEA, evaluate districts on 14 indicators and state whether the target is met or not met for each. The district's performance on indicator 5, which assesses the placement of school-age students in the LRE, is shown in the table below.

District's 2021-22 Performance on Indicator 5 — School-Age Students in the Least Restrictive Environment.

No.	Indicator	Rate	Target	Target Met?
5a	LRE Rate: In Regular Class More than 80%	57.38%	≥60.00%	No
5b	LRE Rate: In Regular Class Less than 40%	19.58%	<18.00%	No
5c	LRE Rate: Separate Schools	0.98%	<3.20%	Yes

Source: Local Level Annual Performance Report 2021-22

Although the district did not meet two of the three indicators for school-age LRE in 2021-22, it did make progress toward the target on indicator 5a, because the percentage of students in regular classes for more than 80% of their school day increased from 54.40% in 2020-21 to 57.38% in 2021-22. Although indicator 5a's target percentage should increase each year as more students access their LRE, target 5b should

decrease because that means students are outside of their LRE for less of their school day. The district did not meet indicator 5b's target that students in special education should be in general education classes for less than 40% of their school day in 2021-22. The district's percentage increased from 17.08% in 2020-21 to 19.58% in 2021-22. The district met indicator 5c for students in special education in both 2020-21 and 2021-22, indicating it is not placing too many students with disabilities in separate schools.

The district is not meeting LRE targets for at least two reasons. First, as staff reported, the district's coteaching program is not being implemented as intended. If coteaching teams were given common planning time, they could improve support for students with disabilities in general education settings and potentially accommodate additional students with disabilities there. Second, staff who believe students with disabilities who have mild to moderate disabilities are best served in SDCs may be hesitant to include additional students with disabilities in general education settings. According to the 2015 report on one system, this practice limits the performance and outcomes of certain students with disabilities who are not being served in their LRE.

The district's performance on indicator 6, which measures the placement of preschool-age students in the LRE, is shown in the table below.

District's 2021-22 Performance on Indicator 6 — Preschool-Age Students in the Least Restrictive Environment.

No.	Indicator	Rate	Target	Target Met?
6a	Preschool LRE: Regular Program	90.12%	≥41.00%	Yes
6b	Preschool LRE: Separate Class	1.23%	<31.00%	Yes
6c	Preschool LRE: Home	2.47%	<3.50%	Yes

Source: Local Level Annual Performance Report 2021-22

The district met the targets on all three indicators for preschool-age LRE in 2021-22 according to its local-level annual performance report. However, during interviews staff reported that most district preschool students with disabilities are enrolled in SDC programs, which fall under the category of a separate class, not a regular program. The district needs to review this data and provide training as needed to ensure each student's educational setting is documented correctly in their IEP.

District Special Education Continuum of Services

Overall, the district offers a full continuum of special education options and services. However, the district did not meet two of the six targets measuring LRE in its most recent local-level annual performance report. This indicates that the district's continuum of service options for students with disabilities may overly restrict student access to general education settings and interactions with neurotypical peers. At the time of FCMAT's study, the district was participating in the CDE Compliance and Improvement Monitoring (CIM) process to address its LRE. The CIM process is a series of steps and activities culminating in the development of an integrated action plan to address an identified problem of practice, such as not meeting LRE targets.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Establish regular collaboration time for coteaching teams so that more students with disabilities can be served in general education settings.
2. Increase the number of students with disabilities educated in general education settings and decrease the number of students with disabilities educated in separate settings such as SDCs, with a focus on meeting and exceeding LRE targets on the local-level annual performance report.
3. Perform an audit of the education settings page of student IEPs to ensure that the amount of time in general education is being reported correctly, and provide training for staff as needed.

Professional Development

The best practice is for district and special education department professional development plans to align with evidence-based practices, such as universal design for learning (UDL) and multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), as outlined in the 2015 report on one system. This alignment is essential to improve support for all students, including those with disabilities.

District Professional Development Plan

The district offers optional, paid professional learning outside of school hours, but staff reported that trainings are not well attended. At the time of interviews, the district was negotiating to add six staff development days to its calendar, which staff reported are needed to build systems and establish standard operating procedures.

During interviews, staff reported that many general education teachers believe that students with behavioral needs belong in special education regardless of whether they have a disability that requires specially designed instruction. Staff interviewed suggested this belief may exist because of unmet professional learning needs, because the district does not have staff development days built into its calendar. Staff interviewed suggested that general education teachers need additional professional learning in UDL, disability awareness, and positive behavioral supports. Ensuring staff have adequate training to support students in general education settings prevents inappropriate identification for special education and ensures students have access to their LRE.

Special Education Department Professional Development Plan

Staff reported that the Special Education Department's professional learning priorities in the 2023-24 school year include providing positive behavioral supports and improving IEP compliance with the IDEA. Based on what FCMAT observes across the state, the Special Education Department offers comprehensive professional learning for special education staff. However, staff reported that many special education staff have unmet professional learning needs because most training is optional and not well attended.

In addition, staff reported that only certain special education staff positions are required to participate in nonviolent crisis intervention (NCI) training. This training provides staff with skills to understand what underlies certain behaviors, learn how to verbally de-escalate defensive behaviors, and safely intervene when a student exhibits an escalating risk or crisis behavior. The industry standard is for districts to require all special education staff to be certified in NCI or an equivalent training program. Possible factors contributing to the district's lack of requirement for NCI certification include a lack of staff professional development days and turnover in the special education director position. Requiring NCI certification would equip staff to de-escalate behaviors and respond appropriately when a student is in crisis to keep them safe and decrease liability for the district.

As mentioned in the "Continuum of Service Options" section of this report, the district should also prioritize training addressing coteaching.

Professional Development for Special Education Instructional Assistants

The best practice is for special education instructional assistants to receive regular training. Staff reported that special education instructional assistants participate in mandated annual training, which includes training in identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect, and bloodborne pathogens, and that some receive additional formal training on topics such as NCI and/or informal training through shadowing or from their classroom teacher. However, most staff members indicated that special education instructional assistants have unmet training needs in crucial areas such as disability awareness, positive behavior supports, positive communication, classroom management, and differentiation strategies. This deficiency in training is exacerbated by a lack of dedicated, paid training time for special education instructional assistants. A lack of training creates potential liabilities for the district and may result in less effective support for students.

Special Education Department Onboarding

The best practice is to systematically orient new employees to a department's culture, goals, procedures, key electronic data management systems, and expectations so they can become effective members of an organization. Some certificated and classified special education staff interviewed reported that their onboarding experience was inadequate to meet the needs of their positions in areas including electronic data management and district and department processes and procedures. In addition, many staff interviewed reported that special education employee turnover is influenced by unclear department goals, procedures, and expectations. The district needs to evaluate its onboarding plan for the Special Education Department to make sure it meets the unique needs of each position in at least the following areas:

- District and (once developed) Special Education Department mission, vision, priorities and goals.
- The district's continuum of services options for special education.
- Electronic data management and reporting systems, such as SEIS.
- District and Special Education Department policies and procedures.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Prioritize professional learning that is aligned with the 2015 report on one system, such as UDL and MTSS, on the six staff development days being negotiated.
2. Annually offer training in NCI or a similar nonviolent crisis intervention program during district staff development days so special education staff can be certified.

Identification for Special Education

Special education should be reserved for students who are eligible to receive these specialized services. To be eligible for special education, a student must qualify under a dual-criteria test, which requires that the student: (1) meet the definition of one of the 14 disability categories in the IDEA, and (2) require specially designed instruction.

Identifying a student for special education before implementing general education interventions does not best serve the student. Students in special education may experience stigma, less access to the rigorous instruction given in the general education curriculum, limited interaction with their typically developing peers, and lower expectations, which can limit their academic, social, and emotional progress and outcomes. In addition, serving a student in special education through an IEP is costlier than serving them through interventions and general education supports.

However, failing to identify a student with a disability for special education can deprive them of their rights to a FAPE under the IDEA. This can impede the student’s learning and may obligate the district to pay for compensatory educational services.

Therefore, it is crucial that the district identify only qualifying students with disabilities for special education. This process is significantly influenced by the district’s implementation of SSTs and an MTSS.

District Special Education Identification Rate

From 2018-19 through 2022-23, the district’s K-12 census day enrollment decreased by 1,682 students, as shown in the chart below.

District’s K-12 Census Day Enrollment, 2018-19 – 2022-23

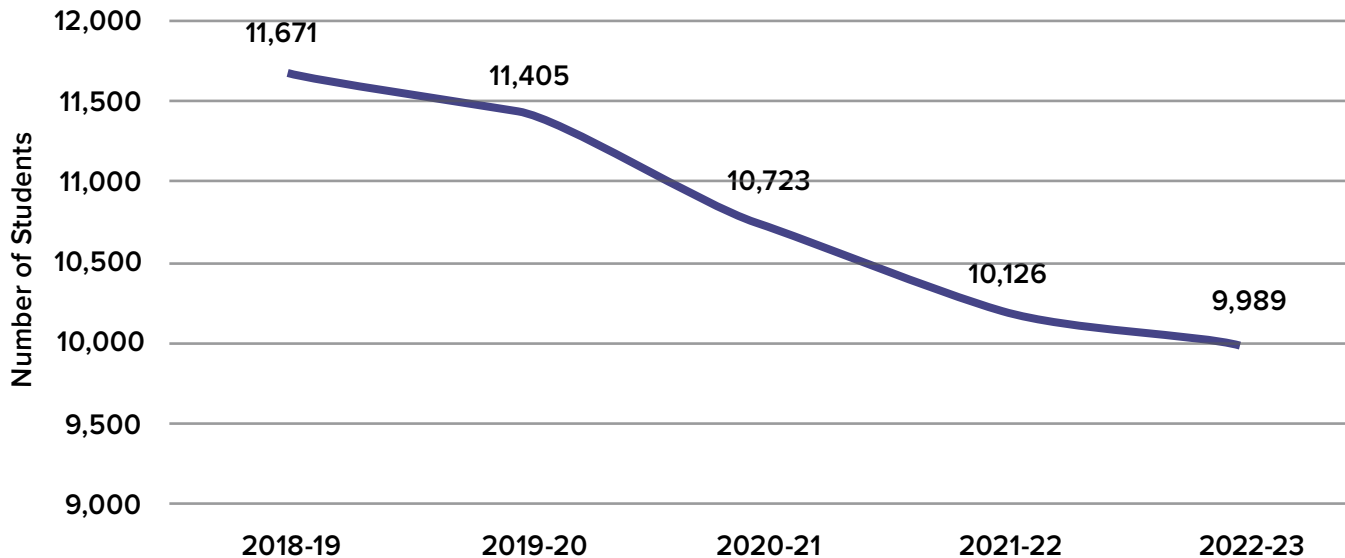


Figure 2: District’s K-12 census day enrollment from 2018-19 through 2022-23.

Source: Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (CDE).

The district’s special education enrollment increased by 19 students between 2018-19 and 2022-23, as shown in the chart below.

District's K-12 Special Education Enrollment, 2018-19 – 2022-23

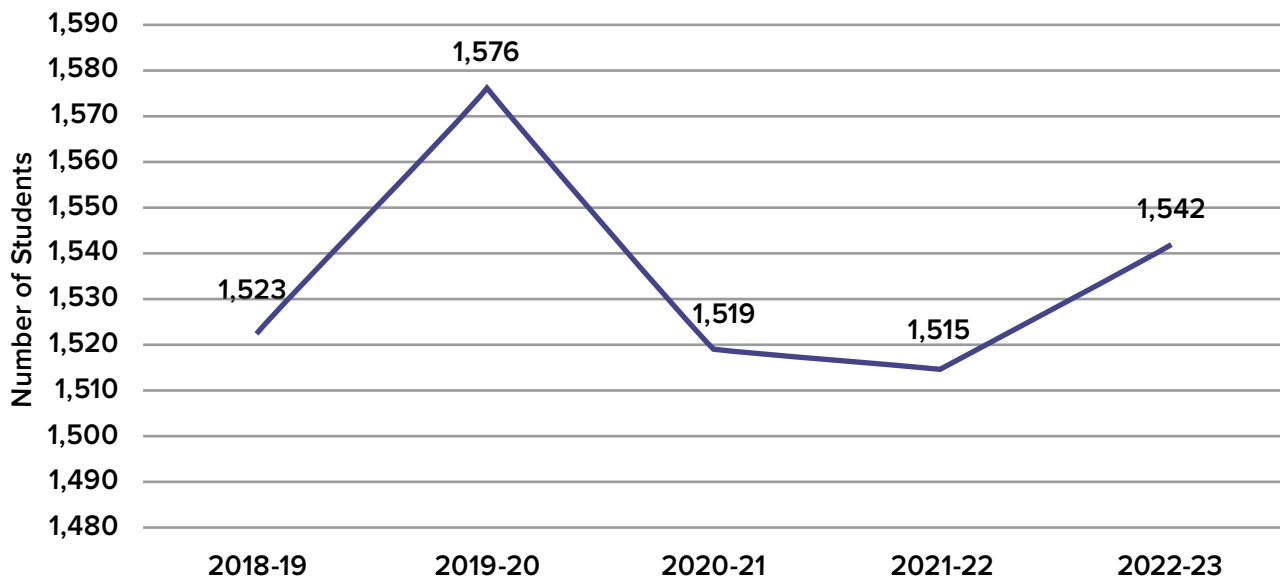


Figure 3. District's K-12 special education enrollment from 2018-19 through 2022-23.

Source: Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (CDE).

Despite making up 52% of the district's total student population, students who identify as male account for 67% of students in special education. This percentage mirrors the statewide average of 67%, as calculated from [DataQuest](#).

Disproportionality in Special Education Identification

The National Association of School Psychologists defines disproportionality as “the extent to which membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category.” It is also the under- or overrepresentation of certain groups in special education. The district needs to monitor for disproportionality in special education identification annually and provide training to IEP teams as needed on how to properly identify students for special education.

Possible Overidentification of English Learners

English learners are commonly overidentified for special education. In 2022-23, 17.66% of the district's K-12 students were identified as English learners, but 26.00% of its special education students were identified as such. Because the percentage of English learners in special education is greater than the percentage in the district as a whole, the district may be overidentifying English learners for special education.

Percentage of English Learners in Special Education and in Total Student Population, 2022-23

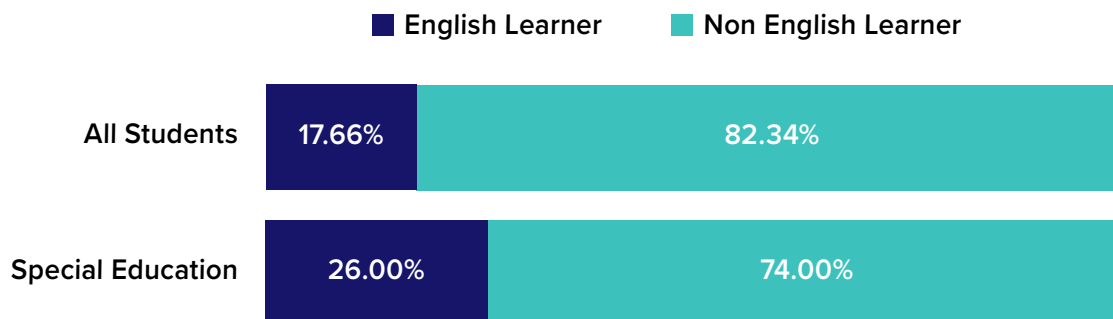


Figure 4. Percentage of district students who are English learners in special education and in the district's total student population in 2022-23.

Source: 2022-23 Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (CA Dept of Education).

Statewide, districts that identify a disproportionate number of English learners for special education may do so because of a range of factors. Examples of practices in other districts that contribute to a disproportionate number of English learners in special education include insufficient staff training, a shortage of bilingual staff to conduct bilingual assessments, or inadequate support for English learners in general education.

Staff reported that for cases in which a bilingual assessment is necessary, a bilingual staff member or staff member accompanied by an interpreter conducts the assessment. The district needs to thoroughly investigate whether these assessment practices are used consistently districtwide to help avoid the overidentification of English learners for special education.

Although the reason for the district's higher-than-expected identification of English learners in special education is unclear, it is imperative that the district identify only qualifying students with disabilities for special education. This is necessary for at least two reasons:

- Even the most efficient special education programs do not receive sufficient funding to support their programs, so it is essential that these finite resources be used exclusively for qualifying students with disabilities;
- Although special education services are vital for students with disabilities, those identified for special education may experience stigma, reduced expectations, and less access to the general education curriculum and teachers.

These factors can limit their academic achievement and outcomes.

Special Education Identification by Disability Category

The best practice is to monitor special education enrollment annually by disability category to ensure students are being identified correctly for special education. Students qualify for special education according to the 14 categories of disability shown below.

- Autism (AUT).
- Deaf-Blindness (DB).
- Deafness (DEAF)/Hearing Impairment (HI).
- Emotional Disturbance (ED).
- Established Medical Disability (EMD).
- Hard of Hearing (HH).

- Intellectual Disability (ID).
- Multiple Disabilities (MD).
- Orthopedic Impairment (OI).
- Other Health Impairment (OHI).
- Specific Learning Disability (SLD)
- Speech or Language Impairment (SLI).
- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).
- Visual Impairment (VI).

According to the WestEd California Special Education Funding System Study, SLD constitutes the vast majority of identified disabilities for K-12 students, followed by SLI and AUT, respectively. In 2022-23, the district reported to CALPADS that 1,634 students in prekindergarten through grade 12 were enrolled in special education. Of those, 614, or 38%, were identified as having an SLD, as shown below. Like statewide trends, the disability categories of AUT and SLI, at 20% and 19% of students, respectively, were the next largest categories in the district.

District Special Education Enrollment by Disability Category, 2022-23

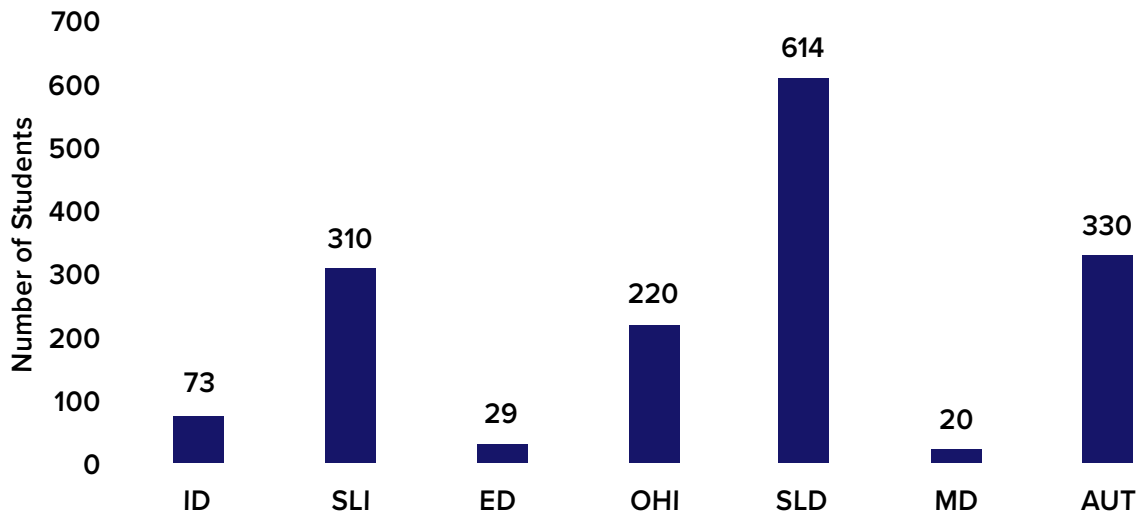


Figure 5. Number of district students in each disability category in 2022-23.

Source: District CALPADS report 16.1.

Note: In addition to those shown in the chart, the district also had students in the following disability categories during the 2022-23 academic year: HH, 12; HI, 2; VI, 6; OI, 14; DB, 1; TBI, 3.

An examination of the district’s increasing special education enrollment by disability category shows that the percentages of students in certain categories are increasing at a far greater rate than others. Notably, from 2021-22 through 2022-23, the number of students in the category of AUT increased from 290 to 330 (a 13.79% increase). Although the percentages of change in several other disability categories were relatively large, they do not require further analysis because of the small number of students in these categories. For example, the OI disability category increased by 27.27% between 2021-22 and 2022-23, but this was an increase of only three students (11 students to 14 students). Special education enrollment needs to be monitored annually by disability category to ensure students are being identified correctly for special education.

Percentage of Students Enrolled in Special Education

The percentage of the district’s K-12 students in special education increased by 2.39 points from 2018-19 through 2022-23, with a rise of approximately half a percentage point in the last year.

Percentage of District K-12 Students Enrolled in Special Education, 2018-19 – 2022-23

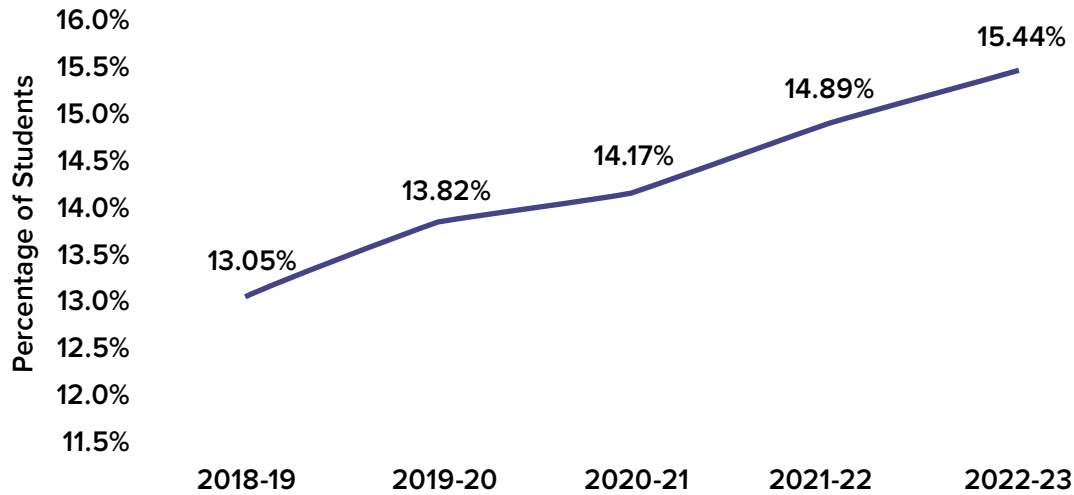


Figure 6. The percentage of K-12 district students enrolled in special education from 2018-19 through 2022-23.

Source: 2022-23 Enrollment for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (California Department of Education).

FCMAT conducted an analysis of total and special education K-12 enrollment for noncharter schools in the district, Los Angeles County, and the state, as shown in the table below.

Comparison of Total and Special Education K-12 Enrollment, 2022-23.

2022-23	Bellflower Unified	Los Angeles County	California
K-12 non-charter school enrollment	9,989	1,108,800	5,166,991
K-12 non-charter school enrollment of students with disabilities	1,542	150,701	683,646
Percentage	15.44%	13.59%	13.23%

Sources: 2022-23 Enrollment for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (California Department of Education).

2022-23 Enrollment for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Los Angeles County (California Department of Education).

2022-23 Enrollment by Subgroup for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - State (California Department of Education).

In 2022-23, 15.44% of the district’s K-12 students were identified as requiring special education. This percentage is greater than both the countywide and statewide averages for K-12 students.

Factors that may be contributing to the district’s rising percentage of students in special education include the district’s implementation of SSTs, prereferral interventions, and MTSS. These factors are discussed further in the next section of this report.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Review its data and practices to determine possible causes of higher-than-expected identification of English learners in special education.

2. Investigate whether its bilingual assessment practices are being used as intended districtwide or may be contributing to the higher-than-expected identification of students who are English learners in special education.
3. Annually monitor the percentage of students who qualify for special education at least by gender, race/ethnicity, English learner status, and disability category, and provide professional development in identifying students for special education as needed.

Factors Affecting the District's Special Education Identification Rate

It is essential that the district identify only qualifying students with disabilities for special education; this is influenced by a district's implementation of SSTs and MTSS.

Student Study Teams

Education Code 56303 states, "A pupil shall be referred for special educational instruction and services only after the resources of the regular education program have been considered and, where appropriate, utilized." Before considering placement in special education, struggling students should be referred to an SST, which is a team-oriented approach designed to help students with a wide range of concerns related to their school performance and experience. All districts should have an SST process.

The primary purpose of an SST is to provide early intervention and develop a support system for students who face challenges in the general education classroom. SSTs are responsible for reviewing students' strengths and weaknesses, identifying appropriate interventions, setting SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based) goals, and monitoring students' progress toward these goals. An SST is composed of the student (if appropriate), the parent or guardian, and various school personnel such as counselors, resource specialists, speech pathologists, school psychologists, classroom teachers and administrators.

The district recently convened an interdisciplinary team, which included a special education administrator, to update its SST process. Before convening an SST meeting, district elementary schools use academic intervention plans (AIPs) to document a student's strengths, interests, and current performance and interventions. A student who is not making adequate academic progress with the support of UDL and strategic Tier 1 and 2 interventions is referred for an SST meeting. The district has developed well-written procedures for staff to document AIPs and SST meeting information by entering it on the student information system's intervention screen.

During interviews, staff explained that the SST processes at certain schools have historically served as a pathway to a special education assessment instead of an opportunity for a student to receive tiered interventions in general education. Although the district has articulated clear intervention steps and provided training, some schools reportedly skip interventions and move directly to a special education assessment, particularly if a student has behavioral support needs. Staff stated that the revised SST process was designed to improve implementation by requiring schools to document AIPs and SSTs on the intervention screen so data can be queried and reviewed. The district is performing an initial analysis of these new processes using AIP and SST data and will provide follow-up training as needed.

Multitiered Systems of Support

California's MTSS focuses on aligning initiatives and resources with content standards to meet the needs of all students. The integrated, comprehensive framework aligns academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning, and implements continual improvement processes throughout the educational system. It serves as a method of organization and uses data collected through universal screening to support decision-making and problem-solving. MTSS includes both response to instruction and intervention (RtI²) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).

Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI²)

Response to instruction and intervention is a nationwide approach targeting individual students who are struggling academically. This approach mobilizes resources from the district, school and/or community to promote student success. It is data-driven and systematic, with tiered levels of intervention. The CDE coined the term RtI² to define a general education approach of high-quality, culturally responsive differentiated instruction and early intervention, prevention, and behavioral strategies. RtI² uses universal screening and data analysis of all students' progress in the general education classroom.

A comprehensive, districtwide RtI² system prevents the inappropriate identification of students for special education and promotes the delivery of services within students' LREs. An RtI² system should define the following for Tiers 1 and 2:

- Type of intervention (e.g., literacy, mathematics, positive behavior supports).
- Who is selected for the intervention.
- Program, materials, and/or curriculum to be used.
- When students will receive instruction.
- Who will deliver the intervention.
- How students will be grouped.
- Time (i.e., duration and frequency).
- Assessments to be used (e.g., for progress monitoring, entry or exit from the support).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

PBIS concentrates on fostering students' emotional and behavioral learning, which leads to an increase in engagement and a decrease in problematic behavior over time. PBIS helps districts adopt and structure evidence-based behavioral interventions.

District Academic Interventions

The district has defined the following tiers of instructional/academic support:

- UDL – “Strategies to take away the barrier for equal access to grade level content standards.”
- Tier 1 – “Strategies to work toward fixing and/or scaffold for the barrier during Tier 1 instruction.”

- Tier 2 – “Additional instructional time beyond Tier 1 interventions (a “double dose”) to remediate barriers by targeting specific needs.”
- Tier 3 – “Intensive Intervention for students who are not responding to Tier 1 & Tier 2 Interventions.”

Each tier identifies numerous supports available in the district to help students with various academic needs. The district has selected resources for elementary and secondary schools and identified best practices for scheduling and staffing academic interventions. Staff reported that district elementary schools use Northwest Evaluation Association assessment data to determine a student’s entry and exit from tiered academic interventions. These academic assessments are formative and interim assessments that help teachers identify student learning needs, track skill mastery, and measure academic growth. These efforts to address students’ academic performance are supported by at least one full-time intervention teacher at each elementary school and by two full-time credit recovery teachers at each secondary school.

Most staff reported that these tiered academic interventions are not implemented as intended at some district schools. Although initial training addressing tiered academic interventions was provided at all schools, a lack of professional learning time to provide follow-up training, or inadequate accountability for implementing academic interventions may be contributing to this practice. This means that only some students may receive academic intervention in general education before being referred for a special education assessment.

District PBIS and Social-Emotional Learning

Staff reported that district schools have received PBIS training and have developed PBIS matrices, which explicitly identify, define and outline how to teach predictable routines and positive expectations for different locations on school campuses such as classrooms, restrooms, or the cafeteria. Staff indicated that schools have PBIS-related signage. The district has administered the PBIS tiered fidelity inventory (TFI) at every school, which measures the extent to which the core features of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports are in place. The district plans to set up a full-day training for schools to refine Tier 1 or Tier 2 behavioral supports depending on each school’s TFI results.

All staff reported that disruptive student behavior has increased sharply at all district schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the district has hired general education behavior aides to support students in general education classrooms, and schools will be able to hire a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) or an additional counselor next year to support students’ social-emotional and behavioral growth. Staff stated that developing systems and expectations for using these staff will be essential next steps.

Staff indicated the district has curricula for the elementary and secondary schools that address social-emotional development and is exploring adding a social-emotional learning course to the elective options at its secondary schools. To support this work, every elementary school has two counselors, and the secondary schools added a counseling position this year focused on supporting students’ social-emotional needs.

Overall, the district’s assessment of PBIS implementation and investments in PBIS training, social-emotional learning curriculum, and staff to support student’s behavioral and social-emotional support needs have created a strong foundation for the behavioral support side of its MTSS.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Regularly analyze AIP and SST data to assess implementation of these processes, and provide follow-up support and training as needed.
2. Continue to develop its districtwide MTSS and its expectations for how general education behavioral aides, BCBA's and social-emotional counselors will support tiered interventions.

Special Education Staffing

FCMAT analyzed staff positions for special education teachers, special education instructional assistants, and related service providers using statewide guidelines and industry standards.

Special Education Teacher Staffing

K-12 Resource Specialist Program Staffing

Education Code 56362(c) specifies a statewide guideline for resource specialist staffing as follows:

Caseloads for resource specialists shall be stated in the local policies developed pursuant to Section 56195.8 and in accordance with regulations established by the board. No resource specialist shall have a caseload which exceeds 28 pupils.

Article XII of the Bellflower Teachers Association (BTA) contract with the district states:

Resource Specialists, including Inclusion Staff, shall be provided on the basis of one (1) Resource Specialist per twenty-four (24) identified students, except at the secondary level, the maximum may be exceeded if the unit members involved agree. No Resource Specialist/ Inclusion Staff shall be assigned more than twenty-eight (28) students.

The district has 33.0 FTE K-12 RSP teacher positions. Based on caseload estimates provided by the district, K-12 RSP teachers manage the cases of 670 students, averaging 20.30 students per teacher, as shown in the table below.

K-12 Resource Specialist Staffing and Caseloads

School Level	Total RSP Teacher FTE	Total RSP Student Caseload	Average RSP Teacher Caseload	RSP Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) the EC Standard
Elementary	12.0	253	21.08	+2.96
Secondary	20.0	417	20.85	+5.11
Floating	1.0	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	33.0	670	20.30	+9.07

Sources: District-provided data and EC 56362(c).

Note: The district's floating RSP teacher covers five schools to provide support when an RSP teacher at one of those schools exceeds the contractual 24-student caseload maximum.

Although districtwide RSP teacher caseloads are lower than the Education Code maximum, FCMAT does not recommend reducing RSP teacher staffing because the caseload maximum outlined in EC 56362(c) is higher than the statewide caseload average observed in districts with RSPs that resemble an inclusive model. The definition of an inclusive model varies across California's school districts; however, the intent of the model is to enable students to attend their neighborhood schools, enroll and progress through the grade levels that match their chronological ages, and access general education classes and curricula to the greatest extent possible. In an inclusive model, specialized academic instruction is delivered either in the general education classroom or through a pull-out service, which involves removing students from the general education class setting for a portion of the school day to focus on specific skill-building activities, depending on students' needs. The district's RSP aligns with the intent of an inclusive model and requires the current RSP teacher staffing to support students' needs.

In addition, to meet LRE targets, the district needs to focus on integrating additional students with disabilities in general education settings for more of their school day. The district’s current RSP staffing will support this effort.

The district needs to review K-12 RSP teacher caseload projections and student needs annually to determine if staffing adjustments are needed at any school level.

District Staffing Guidelines and Industry-Standard Caseloads for Special Day Classes

The district operates self-contained noncategorical classes for students with mild to moderate and moderate to severe disabilities at the preschool, elementary, and secondary school levels. The district also operates an adult transition program designed to provide a non-diploma-based educational program for individuals with disabilities from the ages of 18 to 22 years.

Article XII of the BTA contract identifies class sizes, which are reported in the table below under the “District Staffing Guideline” column. Although the Education Code does not indicate maximum caseloads for SDC teachers, industry-standard caseload ranges are included.

District and Industry Standard Special Education Staffing Guidelines

School Level	District Staffing Guideline	Industry Standard Caseload Range
Mild-to-Moderate Preschool SDC	10 students per 1 teacher (with a maximum class size of 13 students)	14 students per 1 teacher
Moderate-to-Severe Preschool SDC	10 students per 1 teacher (with a maximum class size of 13 students)	10 students per 1 teacher
Mild-to-Moderate K-12 SDC	12 students per 1 teacher (with a maximum class size of 15 students)	12-15 students per 1 teacher
Moderate-to-Severe K-12 SDC	10 students per 1 teacher (with a maximum class size of 13 students)	10-12 students per 1 teacher

Source: Article XII of the district’s contract with the BEA.

Note: Article XII of the district’s contract with the BTA regarding mild/moderate SDCs states, “The maximum may be exceeded at the secondary level if the unit members involved agree.”

Article XII of the district’s contract with the BTA does not stipulate different staffing guidelines for preschool SDCs for students with mild to moderate disabilities from those with moderate to severe disabilities. Overall, the district’s SDC staffing guidelines are similar to the industry standard.

K-12 Mild-to-Moderate Special Day Class Program

The district has 37.0 FTE mild-to-moderate K-12 SDC teachers. Among these teachers, 36.0 FTE lead non-categorical classes, while 1.0 FTE leads a class for students with an emotional disturbance. Because there is no industry standard for mild-to-moderate SDCs catering to students with an emotional disturbance, that 1.0 FTE was excluded from the totals in the table below. Based on caseload estimates provided by the district, the 36.0 FTE mild-to-moderate K-12 noncategorical SDC teachers manage the cases of 448 students, averaging 12.44 students per teacher, as shown in the table below.

Mild-to-Moderate Special Day Class Teacher Staffing and Caseloads

School Level	SDC Support Level	SDC Focus	Total Teacher FTE	Total Student Caseload	Teacher Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Caseload Range
Elementary	Mild to Moderate	Noncategorical	17.0	204	12.00	12-15 students per teacher
Secondary	Mild to Moderate	Noncategorical	19.0	244	12.84	12-15 students per teacher
Total			36.0	448	12.44	12-15 students per teacher
Secondary	Mild to Moderate	Emotional Disturbance	1.0	11	11.00	N/A

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

The districtwide mild-to-moderate K-12 caseload average is within the industry standard at the elementary and secondary level. The district needs to review mild-to-moderate K-12 noncategorical SDC teacher caseload projections and student needs annually to determine if staffing adjustments are needed at any school level.

K-12 Moderate-to-Severe Special Day Class Program

The district has 18.0 FTE teachers for noncategorical K-12 moderate-to-severe SDCs, with 4.0 FTE of these teachers serving students in the adult transition program. Based on caseload estimates provided by the district, moderate-to-severe SDC teachers manage the cases of 185 students, averaging 10.28 students per teacher, as shown below.

Moderate-to-Severe Special Day Class Staffing and Caseloads

School Level	SDC Support Level	SDC Focus	Total Teacher FTE	Total Student Caseload	Teacher Caseload Average	Industry Standard Caseload Range
Elementary	Moderate to Severe	Noncategorical	8.0	87	10.88	10-12 students per teacher
Secondary	Moderate to Severe	Noncategorical	6.0	59	9.83	10-12 students per teacher
Adult Transition Center	Moderate to Severe	Noncategorical	4.0	39	9.75	10-12 students per teacher
Total			18.0	185	10.28	10-12 students per teacher

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

The districtwide moderate-to-severe K-12 caseload average is within the industry standard at the elementary and secondary levels. The district needs to review moderate-to-severe K-12 noncategorical SDC teacher caseload projections and student needs annually to determine if staffing adjustments are needed at any school level.

Preschool Program

The district has 7.0 FTE preschool special education teachers. This includes 5.0 FTE who lead noncategorical SDCs, a 1.0 FTE who leads an SDC for students with autism, and a 1.0 FTE RSP teacher. Staff stated that

the district’s preschool SDCs do not have separate classes for students with mild to moderate rather than moderate to severe disabilities. Consequently, FCMAT used a blended industry standard for the analysis shown in the table below. FCMAT does not have an industry standard for preschool SDCs for students with autism or for preschool RSP teachers, so those are not reported in the table below. Based on caseload estimates provided by the district, the 5.0 FTE preschool SDC teachers support 63 students, averaging 12.60 students per teacher.

Noncategorical Preschool Special Day Class Teacher Staffing and Caseloads

School Level	SDC Support Level	SDC Focus	Total Teacher FTE	Total Student Caseload	Teacher Caseload Average	Industry Standard Caseload Range
Preschool	Mild to Moderate and Moderate to Severe	Noncategorical	5.0	63	12.60	12 students per teacher

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

Note: A blended industry standard teacher-to-student ratio of 1-to-12 was used, based on SDC noncategorical preschool teacher-to-student ratios of 1-to-14 for students with mild to moderate disabilities and 1-to-10 for those with moderate to severe disabilities.

The preschool SDC caseload average is within the industry standard. The district needs to review preschool SDC teacher caseload projections and student needs annually to determine if staffing adjustments are needed.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Monitor teacher caseload and/or class size for the preschool, RSP, mild-to-moderate SDC, and moderate-to-severe SDC programs monthly, and begin projecting and planning for teacher staffing for the following school year beginning in December and continuing through the spring to determine if reductions or additions are needed.

Special Education Instructional Assistant Staffing

Special education instructional assistants, also known as special education aides or paraeducators, are trained professionals who work with students, usually under the direction of a classroom teacher. Districts often employ special education instructional assistants under different job titles with distinct job descriptions to perform functions such as specialized academic instruction, specialized medical support, behavioral support, and 1-to-1 student support or special circumstances instructional assistance (SCIA).

The district employs special education instructional assistants under three different job descriptions:

- Behavior Assistant
- Instructional Assistant, Special Education
- Special Education Health Assistant

FCMAT analyzed staffing for special education instructional assistants. The job description for special education instructional assistant states:

Provide instructional support and assistance to teachers and students assigned to a designated special education instructional program, including Special Day Class (SDC) and the Resource Specialist Program (RSP); perform a variety of support activities related to behavior

management and classroom instruction of special education students; perform a variety of clerical support duties related to classroom activities.

Special Education Instructional Assistant Staffing for the Resource Specialist Program

Education Code 56362(6)(f) states, “At least 80% of the resource specialists within a local plan shall be provided with an instructional aide.” The district has 33.0 FTE RSP teachers. The district did not provide data on the number of special education instructional assistant positions assigned to these teachers; however, it would need at least 27 special education instructional assistants serving the RSP to comply with EC 56362(6)(f). The district needs to review RSP teacher caseload projections and student needs annually to determine if special education instructional assistant staffing adjustments are needed.

Special Education Instructional Assistant Staffing for Special Day Classes

The industry standard for SDC base staffing is one special education instructional assistant for every teacher in both mild-to-moderate and moderate-to-severe SDCs. For SDCs that support students with autism, the standard is two special education instructional assistants for every teacher. In addition, the industry standard for staffing greater than the SDC base staffing is determined by an adult-to-student ratio, as shown in the table below.

Industry-Standard Special Day Class Instructional Assistant Staffing and Adult-to-Student Ratios

SDC Support Level	SDC Focus	Industry Standard Special Education Instructional Assistant Staffing	Adult-to-Student Ratio
Mild to Moderate	Noncategorical	1-2 six-hour special education instructional assistants depending on class size of 12-15	1-to-7
Moderate to Severe	Noncategorical	1-2 six-hour special education instructional assistants depending on class size of 10-12	1-to-5
All	Autism	2-4 six-hour special education instructional assistants depending on class size of 8-10	1-to-3

Source: Industry standards.

Notes: The industry standard special education instructional assistant staffing should be determined by class size to meet the adult-to-student ratio.

Both the classroom teacher and special education instructional assistant(s) are included in the adult-to-student ratios.

Staff indicated that the district does not assign special education instructional assistants to SDCs based on adult-to-student ratios. The reason for this is unknown because of turnover in Special Education Department leadership positions. However, additional special education instructional assistants may be assigned to an SDC because of turnover in special education instructional assistants and because of the large number of special education instructional assistants from nonpublic agencies who were reported to lack training and expertise for their positions. Assigning more special education instructional assistant support than necessary is costly and may limit students’ opportunities to gain independence.

District-Employed Special Education Instructional Assistants

District data indicates it has 71 district-employed special education instructional assistants for a total of 38.19 FTE. More than half of these employees are in three- or three-and-a-half-hour positions, as shown in the table below.

Number and FTE of District-Employed Special Education Instructional Assistants

Position	Percentage of an FTE	Number of Hours Per Day	Number of Staff
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.38	3.0	30
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.44	3.5	14
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.69	5.5	8
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.75	6.0	9
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.81	6.5	7
Special Education Instructional Assistant	0.94	7.5	2
Special Education Instructional Assistant	1.00	8.0	1
Total			71

Source: District-reported data.

Staff reported that the district has filled many additional special education instructional assistant positions with nonpublic agency staff but did not provide data on the number or FTE equivalent of contracted staff. Although the district recently increased salaries for special education instructional assistants, staff stated that the difficulty in recruiting for these positions has continued because most positions are three hours per day, making them ineligible for benefits. The district's practice has been to hire two three-hour special education instructional assistants to fill one six-hour position. Staff reported this has given the district flexibility to have special education instructional assistants in three- or three-and-a-half-hour positions substitute in other positions. District data indicates that district-employed special education instructional assistants can work hours in addition to the required regular hours for their position; the additional hours are recorded using a timecard.

Staff reported high turnover in district-employed special education assistant positions and indicated that employees in these positions typically perform the most difficult daily student support tasks, such as student toileting and diapering, because staff from the nonpublic agencies are not required to perform such duties. Staff reported that the district has been assessing whether offering six-hour special education instructional assistant positions would help the district recruit and retain employees. School Services of California has developed a [classified salary calculator](#) that LEAs can use to help conduct a cost-benefit analysis. Based on what FCMAT observes across the state, the district would benefit from offering six-hour special education instructional assistant positions because this would likely enable it to recruit and retain district employees, which would reduce its reliance on contracting with costly nonpublic agencies and improve service to students.

1-to-1 Student Support

There is no established industry standard for special education instructional assistants who provide 1-to-1 student support. Many districts throughout the state have taken steps to remove the designation of 1-to-1 support because it unintentionally reinforces the concept of one adult assigned to one student. Industry practice commonly refers to both the assessment process and the special education assistant descriptive title as special circumstance instructional assistance (SCIA).

The district has a protocol (“Evaluation to Determine the Appropriateness for a Special Needs Instructional Aide or Health Aide”) to determine the need for 1-to-1 student support. However, all staff reported that it is never used. Staff reported that some students are not assessed before being assigned a 1-to-1 instructional assistant, and others are assessed using a functional behavioral analysis process if the 1-to-1 instructional assistant was requested to address a behavioral need. Many staff reported an increase in 1-to-1 instructional assistant requests following the COVID-19 pandemic to address behavioral needs in classrooms. Because of turnover in special education leadership positions, it is not clear why the district does not use its adopted assessment protocol to determine the need for 1-to-1 student support. Use of a standard assessment process ensures that all aspects of a student’s program are considered, that natural supports and existing staff are used whenever possible, and that additional support is assigned only when necessary for the student to meet their goals and objectives. This failure to use its assessment process means the district may not be encouraging, promoting and maximizing students’ independence. The district needs to set an expectation and hold IEP teams accountable for use of its “Evaluation to Determine the Appropriateness for a Special Needs Instructional Aide or Health Aide” guide to determine whether a student requires 1-to-1 support from a special education instructional assistant or health aide.

Another essential aspect of effective use of 1-to-1 instructional assistant support is developing annual goals for independence. Most staff reported that they do not write goals for independence when 1-to-1 instructional assistant support is added to a student’s IEP. Because the assignment of a 1-to-1 instructional assistant is a highly restrictive support, developing these goals is essential; it focuses IEP services on the deficit area to strengthen skills, monitor annual progress, and help the IEP team determine if adjustments can and should be made in the level of service. It also helps the IEP team move away from the concept of one adult being assigned to one student by leaving the method of goal implementation up to the district. This approach to implementing related goals and monitoring student support allows a district to consider the multiple advantages of having one special education instructional assistant support several students when appropriate. As with any goal, monitoring and reporting on student progress provides a rational basis for the IEP team to alter a service such as 1-to-1 instructional assistant support. Every IEP that includes a 1-to-1 instructional assistant, except for medically necessary support, should include goals for independence and a phase-out plan (also commonly known as a fading plan).

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Review RSP teacher positions and student needs annually to determine if adjustments to special education instructional assistant staffing are needed.
2. Reconsider how it allocates special education instructional assistants to SDCs; consider using industry standards based on adult-to-student ratios.
3. Perform a cost-benefit analysis of the program and fiscal impacts to determine whether it can transition its special education instructional assistant positions that are less than six hours per day to six-hour positions.
4. Use its own “Evaluation to Determine the Appropriateness for a Special Needs Instructional Aide or Health Aide” guide to determine whether a student requires 1-to-1 support from a special education instructional assistant or health aide.
5. Ensure every IEP that includes 1-to-1 student support from a special education instructional aide, except for medically necessary support, contains goals for independence and a fading plan.

Related Service Provider Staffing and Caseloads

Related services are the developmental, corrective, and other supportive services required to help a child with a disability benefit from special education (34 CFR 300.34). These services are written into students' IEPs and include but are not limited to psychological services, speech and language therapy, APE, and occupational therapy.

FCMAT analyzed staffing ratios for APE teachers, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school nurses, school psychologists, and speech and language therapists. The industry standards for related service providers are listed in the table below.

Industry-Standard Provider Ratios for Related Services

Provider Type	Industry-Standard Provider-to-Student Ratio
Psychologist	1-to-977
SLP (preschool)	1-to-40
SLP (ages five through 22)	1-to-55
PE Teacher	1-to-45-55
Physical Therapist	1-to-45-55
Occupational Therapist	1-to-45-55
Vision and Orientation and Mobility	1-to-10-30
Deaf and Hard of Hearing	1-to-15-25
Nurse	1-to-2,274

Source: Industry standards.

Adapted Physical Education

Article XII of the district's contract with the BTA specifies an APE teacher-to-student staffing ratio of 1-to-74, with a maximum caseload of 80 students. The district's APE staffing guideline deviates from the industry standard, so the district will need to evaluate whether aligning its APE teacher-to-student staffing guideline with industry standards would allow it to provide better service to students. The district has 2.0 FTE APE teacher positions with a total caseload of 85 students, as shown in the table below.

Adapted Physical Education Teacher Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Teacher-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
APE Teacher	2.0	85	42.5	1-to-45-55	+0.11

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

Note: FCMAT applied an industry standard of 1-to-45 because the district's APE teacher provides both direct and consultation services.

The district is adequately staffed at 0.11 FTE more than the industry standard for APE teachers. FCMAT does not recommend that the district adjust its APE teacher staffing. However, the district needs to annually review APE teacher caseload projections, the assessment load, and direct and consultation service minutes to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will help ensure alignment with industry standards and adequate support for the direct service and students' consultation needs.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher

The district’s contract with the BTA does not specify a deaf and hard of hearing teacher-to-student ratio. The district has 1.0 FTE itinerant deaf and hard of hearing teacher position, filled by a nonpublic agency, with a caseload of 20 students receiving a direct service. This is within the industry standard of 1.0 FTE deaf and hard of hearing teacher to 15-25 students.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher Staffing and Caseload

Provider	No. of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry Standard	District Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher	1.0	20	20	1-to-15-25	Within Range

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

The district is adequately staffed within the industry standard range for deaf and hard of hearing teachers. FCMAT does not recommend that the district adjust its deaf and hard of hearing teacher staffing. However, the district needs to annually review deaf and hard of hearing caseload projections, the assessment load, and direct and consultation service minutes to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will help ensure continued alignment with industry standards and adequate support for students’ direct service and consultation needs.

Occupational Therapy

The district’s contract with the BTA does not specify an occupational therapist-to-student ratio. The district has 3.0 FTE occupational therapist positions, which are filled with nonpublic agency staff and have an average caseload of 45.0 students. This staffing is within the industry standard of 1-to-45-55 students per 1.0 FTE occupational therapist.

Occupational Therapist Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Therapist-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
Occupational Therapist	3.0	135	45.00	1-to-45-55	Within Range

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

Notes: Only students receiving direct services from the district’s occupational therapists were included in the total caseload and related calculations.

FCMAT applied an industry standard of 1-to-45 because the district’s occupational therapists provide both direct and consultation services.

FCMAT does not recommend that the district adjust its occupational therapist staffing. However, the district needs to annually review occupational therapist caseload projections, the assessment load, and direct and consultation service minutes to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will help ensure alignment with industry standards and adequate support for students’ direct service and consultation needs.

Physical Therapy

The district’s contract with the BTA does not specify a physical therapist-to-student ratio. The district has a 1.0 FTE physical therapist position. This position is filled with a nonpublic agency staff person and has

a caseload of 34 students. This is slightly below the industry standard of 1-to-45-55 students per 1.0 FTE physical therapist.

Physical Therapist Staffing and Caseload

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Therapist-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
Physical Therapist	1.0	34	34	1-to-45-55	+0.24

Sources: District-provided data and industry standards.

Notes: Only students receiving direct services from the district’s physical therapist were included in the total caseload and related calculations. FCMAT applied an industry standard of 1-to-45 because the district’s physical therapist provides both direct and consultation services.

The district is adequately staffed at 0.24 FTE above the industry standard for physical therapists. FCMAT does not recommend that the district adjust its physical therapist staffing. However, the district needs to annually review physical therapist caseload projections, the assessment load, and direct and consultation service minutes to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will help ensure alignment with industry standards and adequate support for students’ direct service and consultation needs.

School Nurses

The district’s contract with BTA does not specify a caseload size for school nurses. The district has 3.0 FTE school nurses, each managing an average caseload of 3,330 students, as shown in the table below.

School Nurse Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2022 Census Day Enrollment	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Nurse-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
School Nurses	3.00	9,989	3,330	1-to-2,274	-1.39

Sources: District-provided data, industry standards, and 2022-23 Enrollment for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (CDE).

Note: Only certificated school nurses are included in this comparison.

The district is inadequately staffed, at 1.39 FTE less than the industry standard, for school nurses. It would benefit the district to increase certificated school nurse staffing by at least 1.0 FTE to align with industry standards and ensure it can meet students’ needs.

School Psychologists

The district’s contract with the BTA does not specify a caseload size for school psychologists. The district has 10.0 FTE K-12 district-employed school psychologists. One works in a split position with 0.5 FTE of the position serving as lead psychologist and 0.5 FTE of the position dedicated to emotionally-related mental health services (ERMHS) assessments. In addition, the district has 2.0 FTE preschool district-employed school psychologists. The district also contracts with nonpublic agencies for additional school psychologist support, but FCMAT did not receive data on the number of positions or FTE. Accordingly, in the table below, FCMAT did not calculate a caseload average but did compute the staffing needed to meet the industry standard.

District and Industry-Standard School Psychologist Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2022 Census Day Enrollment	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Psychologist-to-Student Ratio	Staffing to Meet Industry Standard
Psychologist	Not Provided	9,989	N/A	1-to-977	10.22 FTE

Sources: District-provided data, Pupil Services Staff by Type - California (CDE) , and 2022-23. Enrollment for Charter and Non-Charter Schools - Bellflower Unified (CDE).

Note: The "Staffing Needed to Meet Industry Standard" is the total FTE the district would have if it was aligned with the industry-standard psychologist-to-student ratio. FCMAT did not compare the district staffing to the industry standard because the district did not provide nonpublic agency school psychologist staffing, so a caseload average could not be calculated and a comparison was not made.

The district needs 10.22 FTE school psychologists to meet the industry standard for K-12 school psychologists. The district needs to annually review factors such as the number of initial assessments in the previous year, number of annual and triennial assessments expected in the current year, number of early reassessments expected in the current year, number of specialized programs in the district, total student enrollment, special education enrollment, and other factors to determine if staffing changes are needed to align with industry standards and meet students' needs.

Speech and Language Pathologists

Education Code 56363.3 establishes a maximum caseload of 55 students for SLPs serving students ages five to 22, while EC 56441.7(a) establishes a maximum preschool caseload of 40 students. Article XII of the BEA contract with the district is aligned with EC 56363.3.

Preschool Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing

The district has 3.0 FTE preschool SLPs, each managing an average caseload of 41.33 students, as shown in the table below. All preschool SLPs work in the district under contract with a nonpublic agency.

Preschool Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry Standard SLP-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
Preschool SLP	3.0	124	41.33	1-to-40	-0.10

Source: District-provided data and EC 56441.7(a).

Note: Only students who receive direct services from an SLP were included in the total caseload for comparison with the industry standard.

The district is staffed at 0.10 FTE less than the industry standard for preschool SLPs. The district needs to review preschool SLP projections annually to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will ensure alignment with EC 56551.7(a) and adequate support for students' needs.

Preschool and School-Age Combined Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing

The district has 7.0 FTE SLPs serving students in both the preschool and school-age programs, with an average caseload of 58.71 students each, as shown in the table below. All SLPs who serve students in both the preschool and school-age programs work in the district under contract with a nonpublic agency.

Preschool and School-Age Combined Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Blended SLP-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
Preschool and School-age SLP	7.0	411	58.71	1-to-47.50	-1.65

Source: District-provided data and EC 56363.3 and 56441.7(a).

Note: Only students who receive direct services from an SLP were included in the total caseload for comparison with the industry standard.

An average of the industry standards for preschool (1-to-40) and K-12 (1-to-55) was used (1-to-47.5), because some district SLPs serve both groups of students.

The district is staffed at 1.65 FTE less than the industry standard for SLPs serving students in both the pre-school and school-age programs. The district needs to review preschool and school-age SLP projections annually to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will ensure alignment with EC 56551.7(a) and adequate support for students' needs.

School-Age Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing

The district has 10.0 FTE SLPs serving school-age students, with an average caseload of 58.50 students each, as shown in the table below. The district has a 1.0 FTE school-age SLP who is a district employee and 9.0 FTE school-age SLPs who work in the district under contract with a nonpublic agency.

School-Age Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing and Caseloads

Provider	Number of FTE	2023-24 Total Caseload	Caseload Average	Industry-Standard Blended SLP-to-Student Ratio	Staffing Above (+) or Below (-) Industry Standard
School-age SLP	10.0	585	58.50	1-to-55	-0.64

Source: District-provided data and EC 56363.3,

Note: Only students who receive direct services from an SLP were included in the total caseload for comparison with the industry standard.

The district is staffed at 0.64 FTE less than the industry standard for school-age SLPs. The district needs to review school-age SLP projections annually to determine if staffing changes are needed. Doing so will ensure alignment with EC 56551.7(A) and adequate support for students' needs.

Overall Speech and Language Pathologist Staffing

Based on district-provided data, the district needs at least 2.39 FTE more SLPs to align with EC 56363.3 and 56441.7(a). The district will need to evaluate the data it provided to FCMAT to ensure it accurately reports the number of students who receive a direct SLP service. District data indicated high caseload totals for certain providers, which FCMAT believes may have included students receiving both direct and consultation services. After determining whether its data is accurate, the district will need to reevaluate its SLP staffing to ensure it is aligned with EC 56363.3 and 56441.7(a) and meets students' needs.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Evaluate whether aligning its APE teacher-to-student ratio with industry standards would allow it to better serve students.

2. Consider hiring at least 1.0 FTE more credentialed school nurse to better align with industry standards and meet students' needs.
3. Analyze SLP caseload data for accuracy and to determine how many students are receiving a direct service, then reevaluate SLP staffing to ensure it is aligned with EC 56363.3 and 56441.7(a) and meets students' needs.
4. Regularly analyze whether all related service provider staffing ratios are aligned with current laws and industry standards and are adequate to meet students' needs.

Cost of Due Process, Mediation and Settlements

The IDEA and EC 56500.3 require school districts to implement procedural safeguards for children with exceptional needs. These procedures provide a structured framework to resolve disputes related to the identification, assessment, educational placement, or the provision of a FAPE at the lowest level. Special education is a highly litigated area, most of which involves disputes over providing a FAPE.

District Special Education Complaints

Ninety-four percent of the district's Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) complaints during the past five years pertain to FAPE issues, while 6% involve disputes over assessments. The district prevailed in 20% of cases; the student prevailed in 53% of cases; and the remaining cases were split, often resulting in remedies such as compensatory education or additional services.

According to OAH records, during the past four years an average of four complaints each year involving the district were settled in a hearing. In 2022-23, nine cases were settled in a prehearing conference or mediation, which was more than twice the number of cases settled before a hearing in 2021-22. Only one case was settled in a prehearing conference in 2020-21.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

The best practice is to use alternative dispute resolution (ADR) to settle disagreements informally and early instead of going through a hearing. The goal of ADR is to achieve student-centered resolutions and agree on an outcome rather than having a hearing officer or judge decide. Participants in ADR have an opportunity to share their concerns openly, gain insight into the other party's positions, learn new ways to communicate, reestablish lines of communication, and negotiate their position in an informal, nonintimidating setting. Staff reported that the district has been accessing ADR training offered through the SELPA and that its current leaders are using ADR to resolve disputes early and at the lowest possible level, as indicated by the increasing number of complaints settled before a hearing.

Training for Administrative Designees

Education Code 56341(b)(4) requires that a school district representative who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of specialized instruction and is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum and the district's resources attend IEP meetings. This IEP team member is commonly called the "administrative designee." The best practice is for district staff who serve as administrative designees at IEP meetings to receive annual training that addresses at least the following:

- Roles and responsibilities of IEP team members.
- Eligibility determination process for special education.
- Components of a procedurally-compliant IEP and IEP meeting.
- IEP development process for providing FAPE in the LRE.
- Common reasons for conflict at IEP meetings and strategies to reduce conflict.
- How to respond to unexpected requests during IEP meetings.
- How to follow up if a parent does not consent to the IEP.

Staff reported that school counselors most often serve as administrative designees at IEP meetings. A training for administrative designees was held last year, but many staff reported that staff who serve in this role need additional training. School administrators indicated that one of their job duties when they serve as an administrative designee includes reviewing each IEP for legal compliance before submitting it to the district office. However, staff indicated administrative designees have not been sufficiently trained to evaluate whether an IEP is legally compliant. The special education director is aware that staff who serve as administrative designees need additional training and has identified training modules. Training will begin with Special Education Department administrators and then expand to school administrators and special education and general education teachers.

Monitoring IEPs for Compliance

The best practice is for special education departments to monitor IEPs for compliance with IDEA requirements. Checklists are useful in doing so; they can also guide special education case managers who are writing IEPs and conducting IEP meetings. Staff reported that the district has an IEP compliance checklist, but it is outdated and has not been used recently. This is likely because of a lack of systems and because of turnover in Special Education Department leadership positions. If the Special Education Department revises its IEP compliance checklist, it could serve as a training and support tool for case managers who are developing, holding, and affirming IEPs. Many districts require case managers to attach an IEP compliance checklist as a cover sheet when submitting a final IEP to the Special Education Department.

Special Education Legal Costs

The district's special education-related legal costs have varied considerably over the last three years, as shown in the chart below.

District's Special Education Legal Costs, 2020-21 – 2022-23.

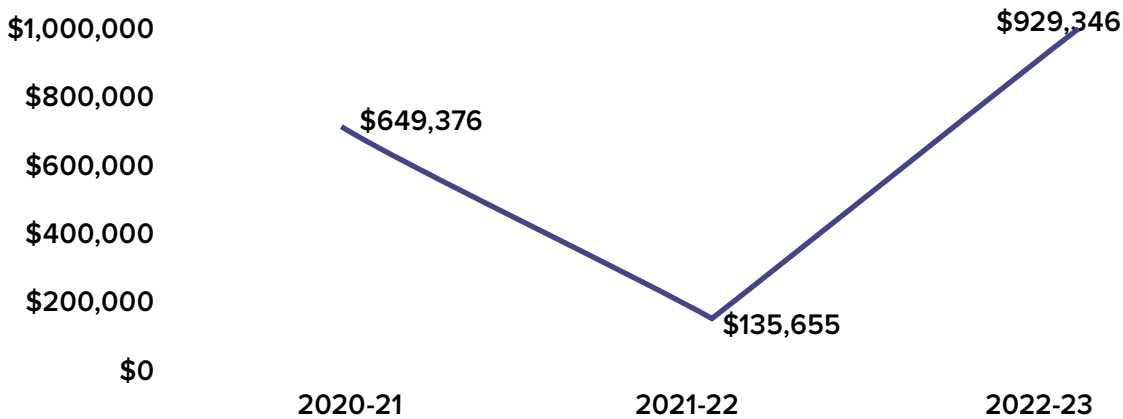


Figure 7. District's special education legal costs from 2020-21 through 2022-23.

Source: District-provided data.

Note: In 2022-23, \$394,796.39 of the district's legal costs were paid to neighboring districts that provided services for district students for joint OAH cases.

The best practice is for a district to maintain a budget not only for legal costs but also for future and ongoing settlement costs. Staff indicated that settlements of less than \$50,000 have historically been approved by the assistant superintendent of business and personnel services, but the superintendent has recently taken on the responsibility of approving settlements.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Continue to provide training in ADR, and work to resolve disagreements at the lowest level.
2. Provide annual training to district staff who serve as administrative designees at IEP meetings regarding IDEA requirements and their role and responsibilities.
3. Develop an IEP compliance checklist and provide training on its use for case managers and staff who serve as administrative designees. Use the checklist to monitor select IEPs, and provide professional learning on common errors.

Appendix

Study Agreement

FCMAT

FISCAL CRISIS & MANAGEMENT
ASSISTANCE TEAM

FISCAL CRISIS & MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM STUDY AGREEMENT May 8, 2023

The Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT), hereinafter referred to as the team, and the Bellflower Unified School District, hereinafter referred to as the district, mutually agree as follows:

1. BASIS OF AGREEMENT

The team provides a variety of services to local educational agencies (LEAs). The district has requested that the team assign professionals to study specific aspects of the district's operations. These professionals may include staff of the team, county offices of education, the California Department of Education, school districts and/or private contractors. All work shall be performed in accordance with the terms and conditions of this agreement.

In keeping with the provisions of Assembly Bill 1200, the county superintendent will be notified of this agreement between the district and FCMAT and will receive a copy of the final report. The final report will also be published on fcmat.org.

2. SCOPE OF WORK

A. Study's Scope and Objectives

- 1) Review the district's implementation of student success teams, multitiered system of supports, and response to intervention, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
- 2) Review the district's system of referral and evaluation for special education, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
- 3) Analyze special education teacher staffing ratios, class sizes and caseloads using statutory requirements for mandated services and statewide guidelines, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
- 4) Review the efficiency of staffing allocations of special education paraeducators per education code requirements and/or industry standards, and make recommendations for improvement, if any. Review the procedures for identifying the need for paraeducators, including least restrictive environment (LRE), and the processes for monitoring the assignment of paraeducators and for determining the need for continued support from year to year (include classroom and 1-to-1 paraeducators), and make recommendations for improvement, if any.
- 5) Analyze staffing and caseloads for related service providers, including but not limited to speech pathologists, psychologists, occupational/physical therapists, behavior specialists, adaptive physical education and other staff who may be related service providers, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.

- 6) Determine whether the district overidentifies students for special education services compared to the statewide and countywide averages, and make recommendations that will reduce overidentification, if needed.
- 7) Analyze whether the district provides a continuum of special education and related services for students from preschool through age 22, including placements in the LRE, and make recommendations for improvement (which may include instructional models), if any.
- 8) Review the organizational structure and staffing of the special education department in the district's central office to determine whether administration, clerical and administrative support, program specialists, teachers on special assignment, and overall function are aligned with those of districts of comparable size and structure, and make recommendations for greater efficiencies, if needed.
- 9) Review the costs of due process, mediations and settlements for the past three years, and make recommendations for improvements, if any.
- 10) Review the district's professional development/training program as it relates to special education, and make recommendations for improvement, if any.

B. Services and Products to be Provided

1. Orientation Meeting – The team will conduct an orientation session at the district to brief district management and supervisory personnel on the team's procedures and the study's purpose and schedule.
2. On-site Review – The team will conduct an on-site review at the district office and at schools if necessary.
3. Exit Meeting – The team will hold an exit meeting at the conclusion of the on-site review to inform the district of significant findings and recommendations to that point.
4. Exit Letter – Approximately 10 days after the exit meeting, the team will issue an exit letter briefly memorializing the topics discussed in the exit meeting.
5. Draft Report – The team will email electronic copies of a preliminary draft report to the district's administration for review and comment.
6. Final Report – The team will email electronic copies of the final report to the district's administration and to the county superintendent following completion of the review. FCMAT will provide printed copies upon request.
7. Follow-Up Support – If requested by the district within six to 12 months after completion of the study, FCMAT will return to the district at no cost to assess the district's progress in implementing the recommendations included in the study report. FCMAT will work with the district to schedule a mutually convenient time to return for follow-up support that is no sooner than eight months and no later than

18 months after completion of the study. FCMAT will then document the district's progress in implementing the recommendations in a management letter.

3. PROJECT PERSONNEL

The FCMAT study team may include:

<i>To be determined</i>	<i>FCMAT Staff</i>
<i>To be determined</i>	<i>FCMAT Consultant</i>
<i>To be determined</i>	<i>FCMAT Consultant</i>

4. PROJECT COSTS

The cost for studies requested pursuant to Education Code (EC) 42127.8(d)(1) shall be as follows:

- A. \$800 per day for each staff member while on site, conducting fieldwork at other locations, preparing or presenting reports, or participating in meetings. The cost of independent FCMAT consultants will be billed at their actual daily rate for all work performed.
- B. All out-of-pocket expenses, including travel, meals and lodging.
- C. The district will be invoiced at actual costs, with 50% of the estimated cost due following the completion of the on-site review and the remaining amount due upon the district's acceptance of the final report.

Based on the elements noted in section 2A, the total not-to-exceed cost of the study is \$29,000.

- D. Any change to the scope will affect the total cost estimate.

Payments for FCMAT's services should be made to the Kern County Superintendent of Schools - Administrative Agent, at 1300 17th Street, City Centre, Bakersfield, CA 93301.

5. DISTRICT'S RESPONSIBILITIES

- A. The district will provide office and conference room space during on-site reviews.
- B. The district will provide the following if requested:
 1. Policies, regulations and prior reports that address the study's scope.
 2. Current or proposed organizational charts.
 3. Current and two prior years' audit reports.
 4. Any documents requested on a supplemental list. Documents requested on the supplemental list should be provided to FCMAT only in an electronic format; if only hard copies are available, they should be scanned by the district and sent to FCMAT in an electronic format.

5. Documents should be provided prior to fieldwork; any delay in the receipt of the requested documents may affect the project's start and/or completion date(s). Upon approval of the signed study agreement, FCMAT will provide access to its online SharePoint document repository, where the district will upload all requested documents.
- C. The district's administration will review a draft copy of the report resulting from the study. The team will review any comments regarding the accuracy of the data presented in the report or the practicability of the recommendations before finalizing the report.

Pursuant to EC 45125.1(c), FCMAT representatives will have limited contact with pupils. The district shall take appropriate steps to comply with EC 45125.1(c).

6. **PROJECT SCHEDULE**

The following schedule outlines the planned completion dates for different phases of the study and will be established upon the receipt of a signed study agreement:

Orientation:	to be determined
Staff Interviews:	to be determined
Exit Meeting:	to be determined
Draft Report Submitted:	to be determined
Final Report Submitted:	to be determined
Board Presentation:	to be determined, if requested
Follow-Up Support:	if requested

7. **COMMENCEMENT, TERMINATION AND COMPLETION OF WORK**

FCMAT will begin work as soon as it has assembled an available and appropriate study team consisting of FCMAT staff and independent consultants, taking into consideration previous jobs and state assignments. The team will work expeditiously to complete its work and deliver its report, subject to the cooperation of the district and any other parties from which, in the team's judgment, it must obtain information. Once the team has completed its fieldwork, it will proceed to prepare a draft report and then a final report. Prior to completion of fieldwork, the district may terminate its request for service, and it will be responsible for all costs incurred by FCMAT to the date of termination under Section 4 (Project Costs). If the district does not provide written notice of termination prior to completion of fieldwork, the team will complete its work and deliver its report, and the district will be responsible for the full costs. The district understands and agrees that FCMAT is a state agency and all FCMAT reports are published on fcmat.org and made available to interested parties in state government. In the absence of extraordinary circumstances, FCMAT will not withhold preparation, publication and distribution of a report once fieldwork has been completed, and the district shall not request that it do so.

8. INDEPENDENT CONTRACTOR

FCMAT is an independent contractor and is not an employee or engaged in any manner with the district. The manner in which FCMAT's services are rendered shall be within its sole control and at its discretion. FCMAT representatives are not authorized to speak for, represent, or obligate the district in any manner without prior express written authorization from a district officer.

9. INSURANCE

During the term of this agreement, FCMAT shall maintain: liability insurance of not less than \$1 million unless otherwise agreed upon in writing by the district; automobile liability insurance in the amount required under California state law; and workers' compensation as required under California state law. Upon the request of the district and the receipt of the signed study agreement, FCMAT shall provide certificates of insurance, with Bellflower Unified School District named as additional insured, indicating the applicable insurance coverages.

10. HOLD HARMLESS

FCMAT shall hold the district, its board, officers, agents and employees harmless from all suits, claims and liabilities resulting from negligent acts or omissions of FCMAT's board, officers, agents and employees undertaken under this agreement. Conversely, the district shall hold FCMAT, its board, officers, agents and employees harmless from all suits, claims and liabilities resulting solely from negligent acts or omissions of the district's board, officers, agents and employees undertaken under this agreement.

11. COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Because of the existence of COVID-19 and the resulting shelter-in-place orders, local educational agency closures and other related considerations, at FCMAT's sole discretion, the Scope of Work, Project Costs, District's Responsibilities (Sections 1, 4 and 5 herein) and other provisions herein may be revised. Examples of such revisions may include, but not be limited to, the following:

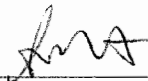
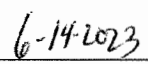

- A. Orientation and exit meetings, interviews and other information-gathering activities may be conducted remotely via telephone, videoconferencing, etc. References to on-site work or fieldwork shall be interpreted appropriately given the circumstances.
- B. Activities performed remotely that are normally performed in the field shall be billed hourly as provided herein as if performed in the field (excluding out-of-pocket costs).
- C. The district may be relieved of its duty to provide the team with conference and other work area facilities.

12. FORCE MAJEURE

Neither party will be liable for any failure or delay in the performance of this study agreement due to causes beyond the reasonable control of the party, except for payment obligations by the district.

13. CONTACT PERSON

Name: William Avila, Assistant Superintendent, Educational Services
 Telephone: (562) 866-9011
 E-mail: williamavila@busd.k12.ca.us

	
_____	_____
Sulema Hulgwin, Associate Superintendent Bellflower Unified School District	Date
	6/29/23
_____	_____
Michael H. Fine, Chief Executive Officer Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team	Date