

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Information:

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PALO ALTO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Date:

06.13.16

FROM: Holly Wade, Chief Student Services Officer
Summary provided by: Dr. Tom Hehir

SUBJECT: Preliminary Findings and Recommendation from the Review of Special Education
in Palo Alto Unified School District

STRATEGIC PLAN INITIATIVE

Academic Excellence and Learning

RECOMMENDATION

This is an information item for the Board of Education.

BACKGROUND

Superintendent Dr. Max McGee and Chief Student Services Officer Holly Wade requested a review of the special education program in the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD). We proposed to:

- Visit the district for one week to tour schools, conduct informal observations in classrooms, meet with parents, teachers, and school and district level administrators.
- Conduct analysis of student level data to identify patterns of identification and placement related to specific demographic variables.
- Understand factors related to student achievement related on relevant outcomes.
- Conduct online surveys of parents, administrators, and teachers to understand attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities, readiness and capacity to improve inclusive practices, and key obstacles to improving education for students with disabilities.

Objective

This presentation offers some of our preliminary findings from our review. We intend to share these preliminary findings with various community stakeholders and continue to collect specific data related to specific trends we identified.

The findings and recommendations we present represent some key areas for growth in the district that we have identified in our initial analysis.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

PAUSD has higher than average rates of inclusion and outcomes for students with disabilities are comparable with the performance of students without disabilities in the rest of the state. Additionally, the district has some promising inclusive practices emerging in Early Childhood and Elementary schools. We encountered and heard from parents, teachers, staff, and administrators who are committed to improving special education systems for students and their families. Finally, we were encouraged by the work of the Minority Achievement and Talent Development Advisory Committee, which offered suggestions for improving equitable access to opportunities that we found very relevant for students with disabilities.

Areas for Improvement

1. Currently having a disability in PAUSD is associated with academic failure. The process of identifying and providing supports and accommodations should be **proactive and preventative**.
2. The identification process for 504 and IEPs is a barrier to providing targeted supports and accommodation **in a timely fashion**.
3. Parents lack information about policies, practices, and procedures related to accommodations and special education and as a result a portion of parents **mistrust the district**.
4. The district lacks **data that is instructionally useful** in improving educational practices and identifying the impact of practices on students with disabilities.

Recommendation 1: Define the purpose and goals of Special Education in PAUSD

We recommend that PAUSD develop a clear vision for the purpose of special education that clarifies that identification of disability should serve to prevent academic failure, not serve as a catch all for academic remediation. Developing systems for the early identification of academic and behavioral difficulties and access to targeted support and interventions should not be limited to students with IEPs or 504 plans. Moreover, the association of disability with academic failure might result in neglecting the needs of academically gifted students who also have a diagnosed disability.

Additionally, we recommend that PAUSD develop a clear and comprehensive Parent Handbook that makes policies and procedures related to the identification of disability, the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the types of services, supports, and accommodations that student may or may not require. Practices throughout the district should reflect the information contained in the Handbook.

Recommendation 2: Include students with disabilities in the PAUSD Equity Plan

Many of the needs of students with disabilities align with the needs identified in the MATD Report. We encourage the district to continue the work on the recommendations outlined in that report and consider the needs of students with disabilities as a part of the PAUSD Equity Plan.

Recommendation 3: Consider building capacity to provide Universally Designed curriculum and instruction to all students.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is based upon a set of principles (see attached Glossary and Guidelines) that are based in cognitive and neuroscience that confirms that learner variability is the norm. When classrooms are set up to teach to “the average student,” leaves many students discouraged and other students bored.

By designing classrooms, curriculum and instruction to remove barriers to learning, UDL can help students “make optimal progress” and “develop as educated and productive citizens” (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2015, p. 3).

While co-teaching is a model that is a significant improvement from segregated classrooms for students with disabilities, the model has significant limitations. First, it still requires students be assigned to specific classes in order to access support. As a result, students with disabilities may not have access to the full range of courses offered to other students. Oftentimes, co-taught classrooms are seen as remedial or “low lane” classrooms where expectations for students are lower. Finally, oftentimes because co-teachers lack sufficient opportunities to plan collaboratively, responsibilities are divided in ways that don’t allow for either teacher to make the most of their expertise. As the district continues to develop inclusive practices, we consider UDL the next logical step in addressing the diverse needs of students while emphasizing the development of expert learners.

Recommendation 4: Districtwide, increase the knowledge of effective strategies to use for specific disabilities.

As our understanding of disabilities has grown, the number of research-based strategies to support students continues to grow. PAUSD should ensure that teachers, administrators, and staff have ongoing, job embedded opportunities to learn about effective strategies to address disability specific needs.

Explicitly teaching strategies fosters independence and self-awareness that are both critical to the academic and personal success of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Since the vast majority of students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms, collaboration between departments across the district is required. These recommendations are significant undertakings that require district level leadership to develop a clear vision and expectations, as well as a plan for training and collaborating with schools and families.

The provision of special education and accommodations for students with disabilities requires ongoing and job embedded capacity development at all levels. Developing efficient and aligned data systems supports good instructional decision making and allows for much greater consistency in practices across schools. Finally, the engagement of parents and students in the work improving special education systems has been a foundation of IDEA since its inception. We have seen the powerful results when families and schools work together on behalf of students.

We are eager to discuss these recommendations with the PAUSD community as we develop our final report to the district.

References:

Meyer, A., Rose, D.H. and Gordon, D. (2015). Universal design for learning: Theory and practice. Wakefield, MA: CAST. Available at: udltheorypractice.cast.org

Preliminary Findings and Recommendations from the Review of Special Education in Palo Alto Unified School District

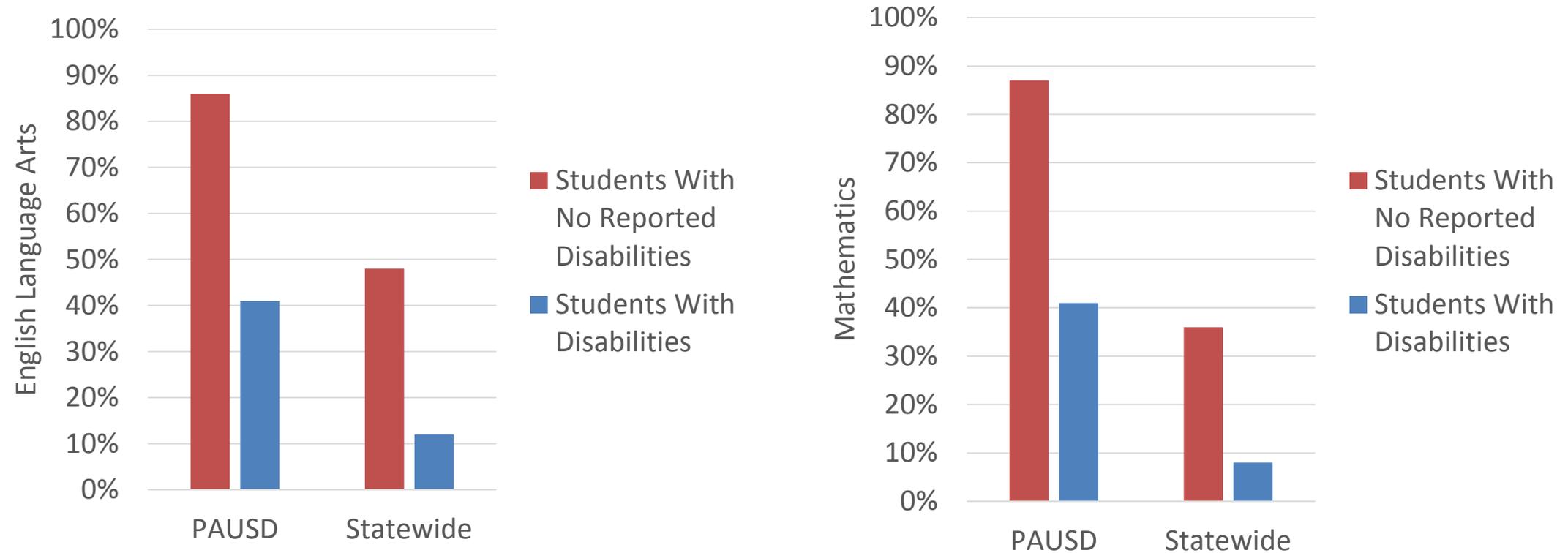
Tom Hehir & Associates

June 13, 2016

Areas of Strength

1. **Higher than national average rates of inclusion** in general education classrooms of all students throughout the district.
2. Students with disabilities in PAUSD have **scores on the CAASPP** that are comparable or exceed the state's average performance for students without disabilities.
3. Administrators, teachers, staff, and parents throughout the district are **committed to improving systems** to support students with disabilities and their families.
4. 2015 report of the **Minority Achievement and Talent Development Advisory Committee** offered a clear set of recommendations that are also highly relevant for students with disabilities.
5. Examples of **very promising practices** in the district (Early Childhood inclusion program for students with autism and emerging inclusive practices in elementary schools).

2015 CAASPP Results: Percent of All Students Meeting or Exceeding Standard (All grade levels)



Areas for Improvement

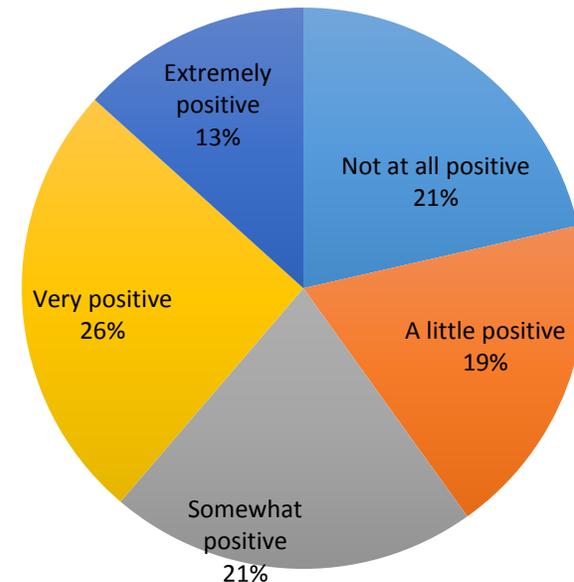
1. Currently having a disability in PAUSD is associated with academic failure. The process of identifying and providing supports and accommodations should be **proactive and preventative**.
2. The identification process for 504 and IEPs is a barrier to providing targeted supports and accommodation **in a timely fashion**.
3. Parents lack information about policies, practices, and procedures related to accommodations and special education and as a result a portion of parents **mistrust the district**.
4. The district lacks **data that is instructionally useful** in improving educational practices and identifying the impact of practices on students with disabilities.

Example: The identification process is not transparent or timely

- 40% of parents responding to the survey indicated that the identification process was “Not at all positive” or “A little bit positive.”
- Parent Survey respondents noted that there was no available information about the steps of the process or district policies.

“One issue for some kids, like our child, is that they are very bright and therefore the teachers ignore the disability because the child is coping. I have heard this over and over from other parents as well. The elementary school teachers should take this more seriously, and not tell parents... “oh...s/he will catch up later” as we were told repeatedly from kindergarten on.” – Parent Survey Respondent

How would you describe your experiences with PAUSD staff in the identification process? (n=369)



Recommendation 1: Define the purpose and goals of Special Education in PAUSD

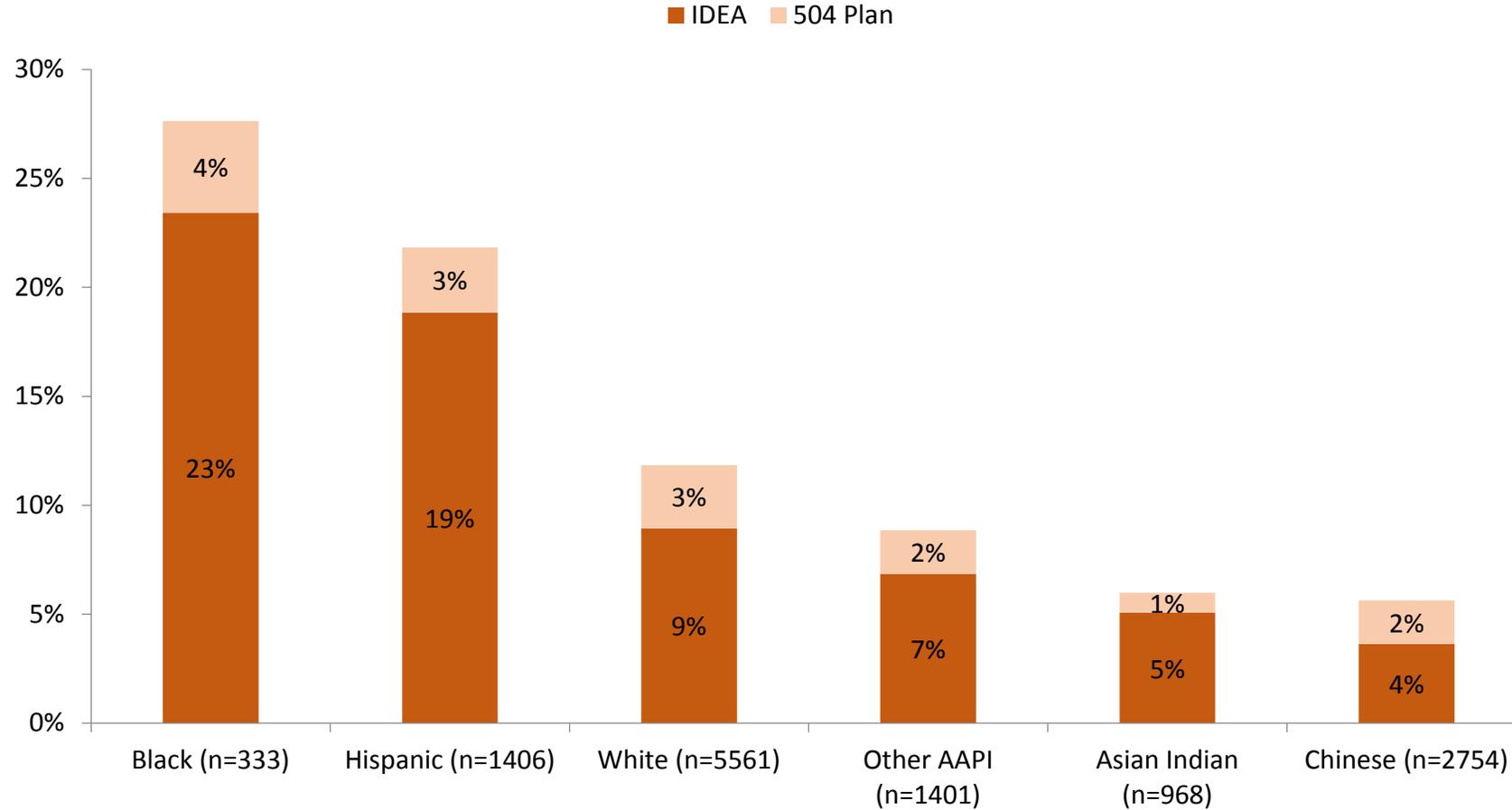
- If special education is going to serve its intended purpose, it cannot serve as a catch all for academic remediation.
 - Not all students with disabilities struggle academically or behaviorally.
 - Not all students who struggle with academics or behavior have a disability.
- Students should not require an IEP or a 504 plan to have access to accommodations and support in the general education environment.
- Students with disabilities deserve specialized and individualized approaches that match their goals and needs, not just general help.
 - In particular, practices such as categorically assigning students to co-taught classes, or the over-use of one-on-one aides can increase dependence and lower expectations.

Recommendation 1: Define the purpose and goals of Special Education in PAUSD

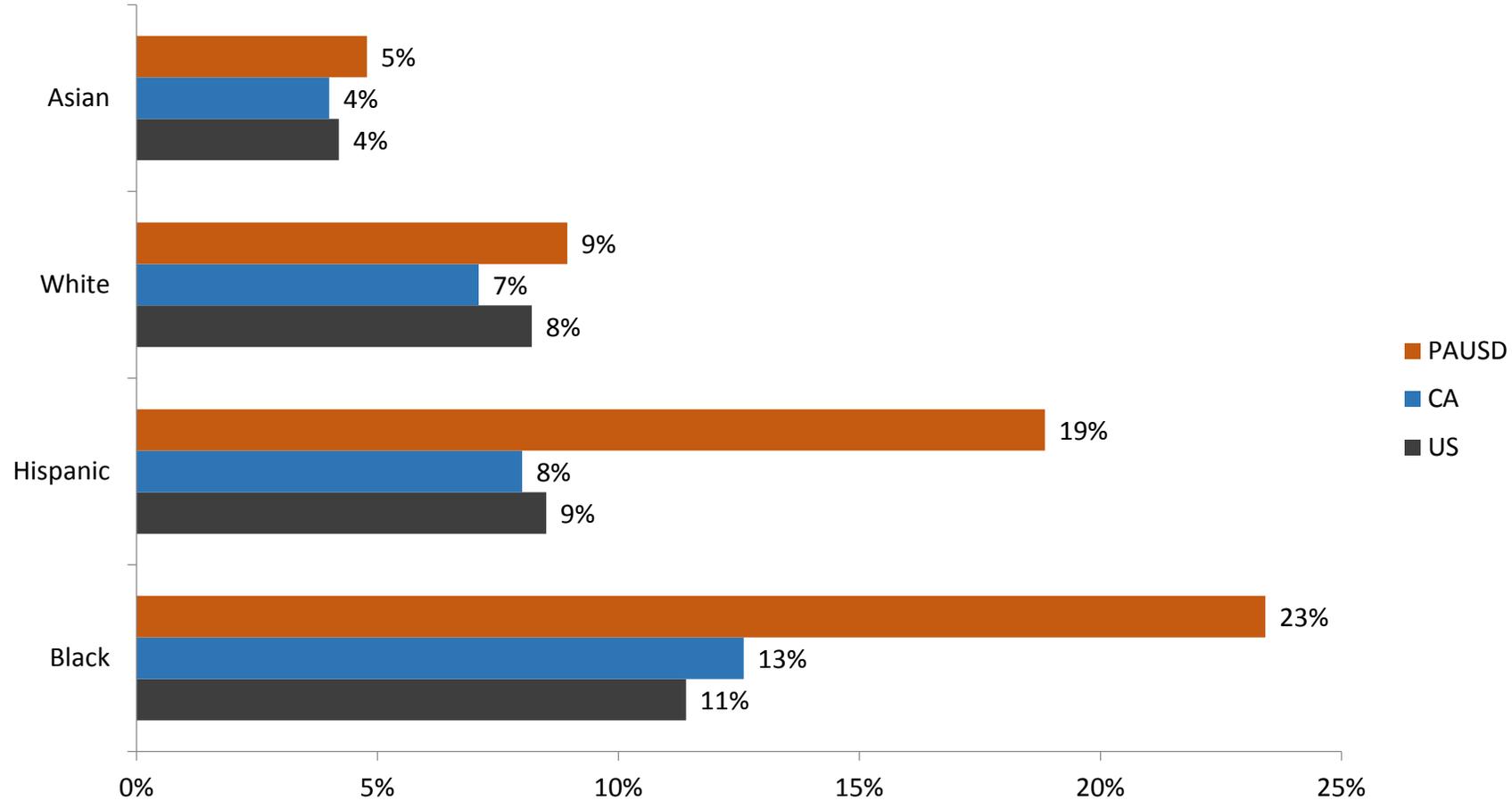
An effective Parent Handbook should:

- Specifically speak to the context of PAUSD.
- Clearly articulate the purpose of disability identification (ChildFind) and the role of special education (IDEA) and Section 504 in providing students with disabilities with interventions, supports, and accommodations that enable them to access the curriculum and meet the unique needs that arise from their disability.
- Clearly describe district policies and procedures related to identification, IEP development, and types of services, support, and accommodations that students with disabilities may or may not require.

PAUSD Identification by Race



Identification by Race vs. California and National (IDEA Only)



Recommendation 2: Include students with disabilities in the PAUSD Equity Plan

Our findings and recommendations are in accordance with most of the findings and recommendations from the MATD.

- Ensure that students with disabilities have access to the rich and robust curricular and enrichment opportunities, including advanced classes.
- Professional learning for all administrators, teachers, and staff to emphasize an assets based approach to working with students with disabilities.
- Implement Response to Intervention (RTI) to identify and address learning difficulties early.
- As part of an RTI Framework, collect and share data regarding progress towards goals.

Recommendation 3: Consider building capacity to provide Universally Designed curriculum and instruction to all students.

- Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles support schools in designing classrooms to support **learner variability**, from students below grade level to gifted students.
- UDL embeds challenge and support into the classroom environment and the design of lessons so that students can use have **flexible access to accommodations**.
- Curriculum and instruction are designed to support **multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement**.
- Response to Intervention (**RTI**) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (**PBIS**) also reflect some of the principles of UDL.

Example: Co-taught classrooms vs. UDL

Co-taught classrooms

- Students must be assigned to a co-taught classroom in order to receive support.
- Choices of co-taught classes are limited.
- Content in co-taught classes is similar to "low lane" content.
- Special educators help students who struggle "keep up" with the rest of the class.

Universal Designed Classrooms

- ALL classroom environments and lessons are planned to offer varying levels of support so that all students can meet learning goals.
- There is an explicit focus on engaging and sustaining student motivation to learn and executive function to foster independence.
- Specialists contribute to designing accommodations and providing supports targeted to students specific goals and needs.

Recommendation 4: Districtwide, increase the knowledge of effective strategies to use for specific disabilities.

- Build capacity throughout the district to **address the specific disability related needs** of students to enable them to maximize their educational opportunities.
 - For example, use research-based strategies to support and accommodate students with dyslexia.

“I worry about the lack of services our students with IEPs are receiving. They are supported mostly by aide support and their needs are not being met. It is difficult for them to continue making the progress they are capable of because they are not receiving the purposeful, teacher-provided interventions required.” – Teacher Survey Respondent
 - Support teachers and staff in developing strategies that **encourage students to understand the impact of their disability** in how they learn and interact.
 - Focus on strategies that **foster independence**.

Principles of Effective Inclusive Communities

- PAUSD district leadership should **develop a clear vision for the purpose** of special education, Response to Intervention (RTI), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and co-teaching and communicate it to everyone in the district.
- Effective approaches to educating students with disabilities requires **ongoing collaboration between General Education and Special Education**.
 - Implementation of RTI and UDL are General Education approaches that require the expertise of special educators to be successfully implemented
 - Effective collaboration requires dedicated time and expert facilitation
- Capacity development of all staff should be **ongoing and job embedded**.
 - Offer opportunities for coaching and detailed feedback at every level
- **Data should drive instructional planning and decisions**.
- **Include parents as partners** by sharing data, involving them in decision making, and soliciting feedback.
- As appropriate, **include student feedback** and leadership in improving systems.

Thank you! Questions?

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- A. Data Sources
- B. Purpose of a Data-Rich RTI Framework
- C. Properties of RTI Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools
- D. Summary of Survey Response Rates and Demographics

A. Data Sources

Quantitative:

Student level data for the entire district (2014-2015)

CAASPP results from the CAASPP/CDE website

Qualitative:

- School visits and informal classroom observations
- Conversations with parents, teachers, staff, and district and school administrators.
- Additional emails from parents
- Surveys of parents, administrators, and teachers.

B. Purpose of A Data-Rich RTI Framework

- A robust, district wide RTI Framework would provide a data-rich way to consider instruction, the needs of individual students, and the progress students are making towards their goals.
- It is a **prevention** framework, designed to identify and respond to risk before failure.
- A strong RTI Data System should:
 - Be based on research validated tools for universal screening and progress monitoring.
 - Offer teachers, administrators, and staff detailed information about areas of student needs at the school, grade, classroom, and individual student level.
 - Be independent of curriculum and vertically aligned.

C. Properties of RTI Screening and Progress Monitoring Tools

Brief

Strong
psychometric
properties

Sensitive to
change

Equated
alternative
forms

Independent
from a specific
curriculum

Measures skill
gaps

Aligns to
targeted
interventions

Guides
understandable
goal setting

D. Summary of Survey Response Rates and Demographics

Demographic Profile of Parent Respondents

- 1,385 respondents began the survey, 906 completed it in its entirety.
- Respondents were predominantly white (54%), followed by Asian (30%).
- Only 82 (7%) identified themselves as belonging to more than one racial/ethnic group.
- Most common language spoken at home was English (65%), followed by Chinese (9%) and Spanish (7%); 13% indicated they spoke a language other than what was listed on the survey.
- Respondents were parents to mostly male students (58%) (1% were either transgender, other, or not disclosed).
- Children's grade levels were evenly distributed; Less than half of respondents were parents to elementary school children (42%), a quarter (24%) were parents to children in the middle grades, and a third (32%) were parents to high schoolers. A few (2%) indicated their children were in post-secondary education or other.

Profile of Teacher and Administrator Respondents

- 369 teachers responded to the Teacher Survey.

Pre-Kindergarten	3.84%
Kindergarten - 3rd grade	35.07%
4th - 5th grade	23.29%
6th - 8th grade	22.19%
9th - 12th grade	29.04%
Post graduate	1.64%
Other (Please specify)	4.66%

- 37 Administrators responded to Administrator Survey

Preschool/Elementary School	43.24%
Secondary School	56.76%