



MEMO

To: School Board
From: Peter Szalai, President
CC: OHEA
Date: 02/13/12
Re: Special Education Needs

Special Education providers are under particular pressure due to the unique demands of mandated federal and state reporting requirements, civil rights of special education students, and the relentless challenges represented by a wide range of disabilities. The District needs to rededicate itself to supporting special education providers so that they can support special education students. District support has been inadequate and uneven, the result being that the special education staff routinely experiences the highest turnover rate of any segment of the certificated employee group. Teachers and specialists burn out at an alarming rate by the lack of resources or overage of work or both, and the District’s program suffers accordingly. This is an abuse, at best, and a waste, at worst of professional talent that is oftentimes very difficult to recruit to our island.

The Oak Harbor Education Association conducted a survey of its members who are special education providers. About 65% of your SPED teachers are routinely donating their planning time and about half are routinely donating their duty-free lunch period to supervise, instruct or assess students. The District should not base the delivery of its special education program on donated professional services. Neither should it turn a blind eye to situations—created by the administration due to lack of resources—that guilt certificated staff into feeling pressured into volunteering time set aside to eat or to plan—time bargained by the parties to guarantee humane working conditions. I call upon the School Board to direct its administrators to adhere to these basic rights: a daily, 30-minute lunch, and a daily, 45 to 50-minute time to plan without distraction.

Three-quarters of your special education staff report that the lack of resources is so severe as to represent a safety issue. The District has not recognized and accommodated changes in the severity of needs. Today’s SPED students represent greater challenges. Here are what your teachers are reporting:

- “The number of staff in ratio to the number of high needs, intensive students is a concern for me.”
- “We need a better immediate communication system between SPED teachers and the office (i.e., radios for every SPED classroom that communicates with the office staff).”
- “Especially when we have EBD students who can resort to out of control, physical behavior and there is not enough properly trained assistants to help.”
- “Not enough Instructional Assistants in the General Education classes; safety issue with equipment.”

- “Students engage in unsafe behaviors such as hitting, kicking, scratching, shoving, and throwing things, and often times I was alone or frantically searching for someone/anyone who could help me keep my other students safe as well as myself.”
- “Some of our medically-fragile children do not always have the appropriate equipment needed.”
- “A few students have attempted to wander off campus; reduced supervision on the playground [contributes].”
- “We do not have the staff to provide an appropriate level of support.”

OHEA SPED members further report shortages in curriculum, materials, adaptive equipment, technology, training, instructional assistants, assessments, and clerical services. But the greatest need is the lack of time—time to assess students, time to complete IEPs and other mandated paperwork, time to meet with parents, time to plan with IAs, time to collaborate with regular education teachers. The majority of your special education providers are volunteering between one and three hours each day to get your work done. OHEA thanks the District for bargaining the right of SPED providers to largely control ERM time. But it is not enough and your teachers are chafing under the strain of too much work and not enough time.

School Board members: Your bargainers have time and time again resisted any meaningful improvement in contractual protections for special education providers. Unlike language that limits class sizes for regular education classes and that requires the District to balance class sizes throughout the District, no such language exists for special education providers. Why? Because each and every time the Association brings caseload or consequential SPED support language to the bargaining table—and we will again this April—your negotiators say NO—and not just NO but a vigorous NO. This is contrary to a collaborative relationship that seeks to address needs and solve problems by respecting the very professionals you rely on.

Right now, some of your special education providers experience a 30% variance in workload based purely on caseload numbers. If we don’t tolerate such an imbalance in the regular education world, why do you insist on such an unfairness from your most burdened and vulnerable employees? We suggest a caseload limit of 25 for resource and 12 for life skills or EBD, as examples.

The District used to guarantee additional non-instructional time to special education providers so that they could process vital, legal, and revenue-generating paperwork. The IEP period was summarily eliminated. Instead of making some sort of adjustment for this lost time, the District simply assumed and is now relying upon donated professional services

It’s time for specific caseload numbers, for the expectation that caseloads will be balanced among the specialties, and for compensated time to pay for the work that you are requiring to be accomplished. Just as the District provides extended contracts for secondary counselors, so, too, it could be willing to provide for additional per diem pay that either buys back donated planning time or adds TRI to SPED contracts.

In sum, ponder the words of one of your special education providers: “I love my job but I am becoming stressed and overwhelmed with my caseload, lack of support, and lack of resources. I have great students but I am afraid with all of these cuts that I will burn out soon.”

As a District, we can and must do better.