



# **Atascadero Unified School District Special Education Review**

October 2, 2009

Joel D. Montero  
Chief Executive Officer





**CSIS California School Information Services**

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October 2, 2009

Mr. John Rogers, Superintendent  
Atascadero Unified School District  
5601 West Mall  
Atascadero, CA 93422

Dear Superintendent Rogers:

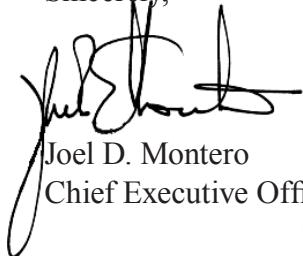
In July 2009, the Atascadero Unified School District and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) entered into an agreement to provide a review of the special education programs and services provided to the district's students by the district and the county office of education. Specifically, the agreement states that FCMAT will do the following:

1. Determine if it would be cost-effective for the district to operate additional special education programs for students with special needs rather than contracting with the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (SLOCOE) to provide certain specialized services.
2. Review the organizational structure and staffing of the district's special education programs and services and provide recommendations for restructuring if the district plans to take back programs from the SLOCOE.

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

FCMAT appreciates the opportunity to serve and extend its thanks to all the staff of the Atascadero Unified School District and the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education for their assistance and cooperation during this review.

Sincerely,



Joel D. Montero  
Chief Executive Officer

**FCMAT**

Joel D. Montero, Chief Executive Officer

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# Table of Contents

**Foreword .....iii**

**Introduction ..... I**

*Background..... I*

*Study Guidelines..... I*

*Study Team ..... 2*

**Executive Summary ..... 3**

**Findings and Recommendations ..... 5**

*Regional Program Transfer ..... 5*

*Fiscal Review and Analysis ..... 9*

*Parent Participation and Communication ..... 17*

*Staffing and Organization ..... 21*

**Appendices ..... 23**



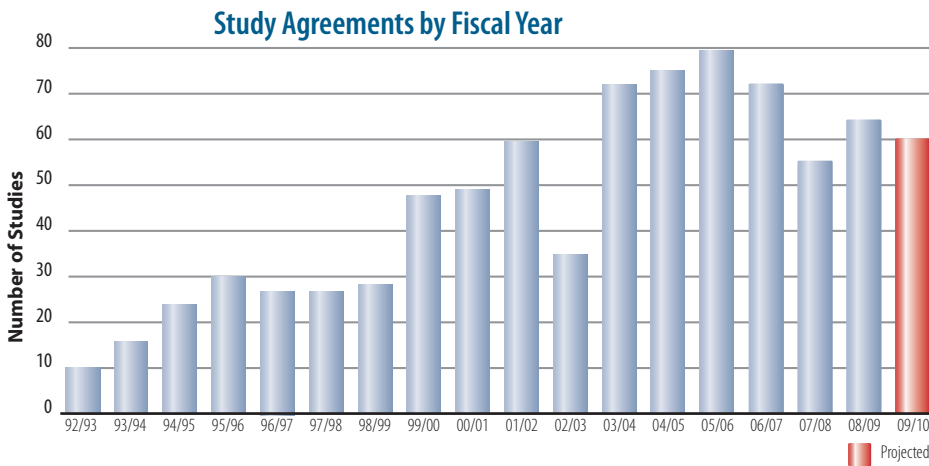
# Foreword - FCMAT Background

The Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) was created by legislation in accordance with Assembly Bill 1200 in 1992 as a service to assist local educational agencies (LEAs) in complying with fiscal accountability standards.

AB 1200 was established from a need to ensure that LEAs throughout California were adequately prepared to meet and sustain their financial obligations. AB 1200 is also a statewide plan for county offices of education and school districts to work together on a local level to improve fiscal procedures and accountability standards. The legislation expanded the role of the county office in monitoring school districts under certain fiscal constraints to ensure these districts could meet their financial commitments on a multiyear basis. AB 2756 provides specific responsibilities to FCMAT with regard to districts that have received emergency state loans. These include comprehensive assessments in five major operational areas and periodic reports that identify the district’s progress on the improvement plans.

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

Since 1992, FCMAT has been engaged to perform nearly 750 reviews for local educational agencies, including school districts, county offices of education, charter schools and community colleges. Services range from fiscal crisis intervention to management review and assistance. FCMAT also provides professional development training. The Kern County Superintendent of Schools is the administrative agent for FCMAT. The agency is guided under the leadership of Joel D. Montero, Chief Executive Officer, with funding derived through appropriations in the state budget and a modest fee schedule for charges to requesting agencies.



<b>Total Number of Studies.....</b>	<b>743</b>
<b>Total Number of Districts in CA.....</b>	<b>982</b>
● Management Assistance.....	705 (94.886%)
● Fiscal Crisis/Emergency .....	38 (5.114%)
Note: Some districts had multiple studies.	
● Districts (7) that have received emergency loans from the state.	
(Rev. 1/22/09)	





# Introduction

## *Background*

The Atascadero Unified School District is located in northern San Luis Obispo County on California's central coast. Geographically, the district is one of the largest in the state and serves 5,384 students in grades K-12 and an adult education program. Ten of the district's schools are located within the Atascadero city limits, while the remaining three are in outlying or unincorporated areas. Students with severe disabilities have historically been served by the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education through the San Luis Obispo SELPA's regional service plan.

In July 2009 the Atascadero Unified School District requested that FCMAT assist the district by reviewing special education programs and services provided to the district's students by the district and the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education. The study agreement specifies that FCMAT will perform the following.

1. Determine if it would be cost effective for the district to operate additional special education programs for students with special needs rather than contracting with the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education to provide certain specialized services.
2. Review the organizational structure and staffing of the district's special education programs and services and provide recommendations for restructuring if the district plans to take back programs from the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education.

## *Study Guidelines*

FCMAT visited the district on August 25-28, 2009 to collect data, review documents, and conduct interviews with county office and district staff, and with parents. This report is the result of those activities and is divided into the following sections:

- I. Executive Summary
- II. Regional Program Transfer
- III. Fiscal Review and Analysis
- IV. Parent Participation and Communication
- V. Staffing and Organization
- VI. Appendices

## *Study Team*

The study team was composed of the following members:

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# Executive Summary

The Atascadero Unified School District is currently evaluating the concept of transferring special education programs operated by the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (county office) to the district. The district's staff are positive and dedicated to serving their students in the least restrictive environment. While the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education continues to provide excellent service to the district's students, the states current economic conditions have forced the district to evaluate all cost containment measures. FCMAT identified five major areas of benefit to the district and its students in the event that nine county office-operated programs are transferred to district operation.

The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education currently has full responsibility for special education program design, delivery, curriculum and staff supervision in its partnership to serve special education students on behalf of the district. The transfer of programs would allow the district to respond directly to parents' concerns.

Flexibility in meeting individual students' needs can be limited when programs are contracted outside the home school district. District-operated programs would offer a smoother transition along the full continuum of services for all district students.

Students referred to county office-operated programs go through an additional intake process. District operation of these programs would eliminate this process, reducing referral time and costs.

District-operated programs are considered part of the total school program, while county office-operated programs report to a different administration. Students in district-operated programs would have increased access to extracurricular and other school wide activities.

The district is concerned about the annual fluctuations in the cost of county office-operated programs. In March 2008, the district was informed that its costs for the programs operated by the county office for fiscal year 2008-09 are projected to be \$1,966,118 minus average daily attendance (ADA). In January 2009, the district was informed that its annual costs would be increased to \$2,598,231 minus ADA. The final bill presented to the district was for \$2,463,231 minus ADA, an increase of \$497,113, or 25%, from the amount indicated in March 2008. In a fiscal year when the district's enrollment continues to decline and the state budget projects an 18.355% deficit to revenue limit funding for the current and two subsequent fiscal years, the district cannot sustain its financial solvency without reviewing every program in detail. The district has also experienced a 20% cut to categorical programs over the past two years and an additional one-time reduction of \$252.83 per ADA included with ABX4, the state's latest budget revision. All these declining economic factors continue to exert pressure on the district's financial condition.

For fiscal year 2009-10, the cost for the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education to provide special education programs and services for the district's students is projected to be \$3,018,761. This is an increase of \$555,530, or 22.55%, compared to 2008-09. While

all local educational agencies are experiencing a decrease in state funding, many school districts throughout the state have been forced to re-evaluate the cost of services provided by county offices versus an in house service delivery model. Projected increases in staffing and operating costs for county office-operated programs, combined with the growth in the number of the district's students who need specialized services, require the district to explore all options to reduce costs.

# Findings and Recommendations

## *Regional Program Transfer*

### *Programs and Services*

Although county office-operated special education programs are located on district sites, they report to a separate administration. Under the current model the county office has full responsibility for the program design, curriculum and instructional methods of the programs.

Special education students and staff have limited interaction with other district students and staff. Certificated staff are hired, supervised and evaluated by the county office, which does not allow for extensive involvement on the part of school site administrators. The county office also assumes full oversight of special education programs' design, curriculum and staff development.

This type of delivery model can limit the district's flexibility in meeting individual students' needs. District personnel reported to FCMAT that there is limited communication between the county office and the district regarding the transition of students along the full continuum of services. Opportunities to mainstream students into general education classes can also be delayed due to the additional layer of coordination and communication required with county office-operated programs and the school sites.

When the district receives communications or concerns from parents about their students' county office-operated special education program, it can offer little or no information. This is not a criticism of the communication processes used by the county office-operated programs but is a disadvantage of this type of model from the district's perspective. A by-product of this type of delivery model is the lack of direct contact with county office staff to resolve day-to-day issues concerning individual students' programs or services. Many times, parents can be confused by the district's limited information about their child and do not always understand the difference between county office-operated and district-operated programs.

The district incurs costs from due process cases that involve its students enrolled in county office-operated programs; at the same time, it has no local control over the resolution of those issues or the associated costs.

The district's school principals expressed a strong interest in supervising all special education programs, including those for children who are currently in county office-operated programs in the mainstream of the school. This has not always been the district's philosophy, but current educational strategies include educators seeking new and improved methods to provide academic successes at each school site. If there is to be a smooth transition of programs to district operation, the principals will need highly focused training to ensure that staff are trained to provide appropriate programs and services. Due to the state's ongoing fiscal crisis, the district's principals have recently experienced significant

staffing and administrative decreases and will need support to develop an understanding of the needs of newly assigned special education programs at their site.

Table 1 shows the enrollment in each of the special education programs that the district is considering transferring to district operation.

**Table 1: Current enrollment in programs being considered for transfer to district operation**

<b>Specialized Programs</b>	<b>Atascadero USD Enrollment</b>	<b>County Office of Education Enrollment</b>	<b>Total Enrollment</b>
Adaptive Physical Education (APE) Services	8	6	14
Occupational Therapy (OT) Services	15	8	23
<b>County Office-Operated Programs</b>	<b>Atascadero USD Enrollment</b>	<b>Regional Enrollment</b>	<b>Total Enrollment</b>
San Gabriel West Pre-School Class – Severely Handicapped (SH) A.M. Class	8	TUSD – 2	10
San Gabriel West Pre-School Class SH – P.M. Class	10	0	10
Del Rio Pre-school	4	PRPS – 1	5
Monterey Road Elementary SH (K-2)	5	PRPS – 1 TUSD – 2	8
Santa Margarita Elementary SH (3-6)	10	TUSD – 2	12
Atascadero Jr. High Severely Handicapped (SH) (7-8)	3	TUSD – 2 PRPS – 1	6
Atascadero High Severely Handicapped (SH) (9-12)	12	TUSD – 1 PRPS – 2	15
Monterey Road Elementary Emotionally Disturbed (ED) (K-6)	4	TUSD – 1 PRPS – 3 Shandon – 1 San Miguel – 1	10
Atascadero High Emotionally Disturbed (ED) (9-12)	10	0	10
<b>Totals</b>	<b>66</b>	TUSD – 10 PRPS – 8 San Miguel – 1 Shandon – 1 <b>20</b>	<b>86</b>

TUSD: Templeton Unified School District • PRPS: Paso Robles Public Schools

## **Recommendations**

*The district should:*

1. Ensure that the superintendent, cabinet and school site principals meet to discuss the rationale for returning county office-operated special education programs to the district. Gather input from the principals regarding the support and professional training that will be needed to successfully transition and operate these programs on school sites.
2. Refine the transition plan to ensure a seamless transition of student information from the county office to the district.
3. Coordinate efforts between the district and county office to ensure articulation of the program design, curriculum and instructional methods.
4. Develop strategies to ensure program continuity during the transition, including, but not limited to, effective communication about the transition process, articulation with all involved, and progress reports.
5. Consider implementing schoolwide mentoring programs for students with severe disabilities to improve access to opportunities at the school site.
6. Complete case reviews on each student transferring from county to district programs. Build program design around the unique needs of each student population, incorporating it into the overall instructional design of the school site where each program is located.
7. Notify each parent after the case review is completed to ensure confidence about the continuity of program and services.
8. Create a staff development plan for principals and general education teachers to prepare for the transition of special education programs to the district.
9. Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the school site principals and the special education department in the operation of all district special education programs.
10. Create opportunities for principals and the district office staff to solve programming issues at their sites. This should be done as often as needed but no less than quarterly.

## **Referrals**

Students referred to county office-operated programs go through an additional intake process, which can result in delayed services and additional costs for the district. District operation of these programs will eliminate this additional step and help reduce the program's total operating costs.

The transfer from county-operated to district-operated programs may require some adjustment to individual educational plans (IEPs) for certain students. This can be done through an IEP addendum, which would need to be completed prior to the transfer.

### ***Recommendations***

The district should:

1. Develop a referral process for specialized settings to replace the current county process, and ensure that all staff receive highly focused training in the new process.
2. Conduct IEP meetings for necessary adjustments.

### ***Regional Programs***

Under the current delivery model, students in county office-operated programs have limited access to extracurricular and schoolwide activities. The district recognizes the difficulty of operating a full range of programs to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities and is interested in exploring the possibility of cooperating with other districts to build capacity and provide necessary support services. Other districts have also expressed a desire to develop cooperative relationships to provide a full range of options that may include participation in extracurricular and schoolwide activities. The San Luis Obispo County special education local plan area (SELPA) will need to be an active participant in any discussions about regional program development.

District-operated and county office-operated special education classes are not distributed equally throughout the district. When planning, the district will need to consider that this could cause an unequal distribution of responsibilities to site administrators if programs are transferred to district control.

### ***Recommendations***

The district should:

1. Explore options to increase the transitioning students' access to extracurricular and schoolwide activities.
2. Carefully consider the unique needs of this student population with regard to extracurricular and schoolwide activities.
3. Balance the physical location of classes on school campuses, and ensure that principals are involved in planning.
4. Maintain contact with the SELPA regarding the development of regional classes.



## *Fiscal Review and Analysis*

### *Cost Comparison of Basic Programs*

The county office has increased the cost of multiple items included in the basic program costs, as indicated in Table 2 below. However, the cost increase is also attributable to the increase in the number of the district's students projected to attend county office-operated programs or receive a related service from the county office while attending a district program. The projected increase is from 89.87 students in 2008-09 to 97 students in 2009-10. The fraction of a student results from dividing the number of students by the months of their attendance.

Table 3 indicates the cost increases or decreases from 2008-09 to 2009-10 for each item included in a county office-operated basic program. This table allows the additional costs for a county office-operated program in 2009-10 to be compared with the same costs for a district-operated basic program.

The cost of the county office-operated basic program is \$264,391 per class. Nine classes are being considered for transfer to district operation: two preschool classes, two classes for emotionally disturbed students, one R2L (Autism) class, and four basic program classes. Additional fees are applied to the basic program for specialized classes; Table 3 shows the cost per specialized class. The total basic program cost for the nine classes is \$2,379,519, and the increase for the five specialized classes is \$235,647, bringing the total cost for the nine classes to \$2,615,166. This is an increase of \$294,618, or 12.69%, for the 2009-10 fiscal year.

The costs listed for the 2008-09 fiscal year were based on the final billing information that the county office provided to the district. Because the tables are designed to compare basic program costs, this information does not include the cost of related services to students who attend district-operated programs.

**Table 2: Comparison of costs for county office-operated classes for 2008-09 and projected costs for classes for 2009-10**

	2008-09 cost	2009-2010 cost	Difference: Basic Program
Classroom Teacher	\$83,604	\$79,510	-\$4,094
Teacher Substitutes	0	\$3,152	+\$3,152
Aides	\$47,847	\$53,128	+\$5,281
Aide Substitutes	0	\$5,030	+\$5,030
Nursing	\$2,036	\$9,597	+\$7,561
Psychologists	\$3,007	\$6,787	+\$3,780
Speech	\$13,338	\$13,759	+\$421
DIS	\$11,136	\$12,065	+\$929
Instructional Support/Site Admin	\$22,688	\$27,151	+\$4,463
Instructional Materials	\$3,897	\$1,323	-\$2,574
Legal	\$2,215	\$1,194	-\$1,021
Maintenance/Custodial	\$24,494	\$25,936	+\$1,442
Facilities	\$ 9,494	\$ 6,061	-\$3,433
Indirect	\$13,627	\$19,698	+\$6,071
<b>Total for a Basic Program</b>	<b>\$237,383</b>	<b>\$264,391</b>	<b>+\$27,008</b>
Additional for Preschool	\$11,523	\$26,306	+\$14,783
Additional for ED Class	\$26,475	\$42,124	+\$15,649
Additional for R2L Class	\$108,105	\$98,787	-\$9,318
<b>Total cost for nine classes</b>	<b>\$2,320,548</b>	<b>\$2,615,166</b>	<b>+\$294,618</b>

On June 30, 2009, the district presented the San Luis Obispo County SELPA and the county office with a letter requesting the transfer of nine classes and two related services, occupational therapy and adaptive physical education, from the county office to the district.

Table 3 compares the projected cost for a county office-operated basic program and specialized programs for 2009-10 with the projected costs for the district to operate the same nine classes. It was not possible for FCMAT to project the costs in this way for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which is the year of possible transfer.

The projected costs for both the district and the county office are based on average salaries. When the district computes actual salaries, there may be an increase or decrease compared to the estimated costs. Table 3 does not include a projected cost comparison for the two related services that the district requested be transferred.

**Table 3: Comparison of county office and district projected costs for classes for 2009-10**

	<b>County Office Projected Cost</b>	<b>Atascadero USD Projected Cost</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Classroom Teacher	\$79,510	\$78,762	-\$748
Combo Class Stipend		\$2,511	+ \$2,511
Teacher Substitutes	\$3,152	\$1,542	- \$1,610
Aides	\$53,128	\$55,393	+\$2,265
Aide Substitutes	\$5,030	\$3,305	-\$1,725
Nursing	\$ 9,597	\$4,379	-\$5,218
Psychologist	\$6,787	\$5,357	-\$1,430
Speech	\$13,759	\$13,127	-\$632
DIS	\$12,065	+/- \$12,065	+/- \$0
Instructional Support/Site Admin	\$27,151	\$18,174	-\$8,977
Instructional Materials	\$1,323	\$4,636 (including Staff Development)	+\$3,313
Legal	\$1,194	0	-\$1,194
Maintenance/Custodial	\$25,936	\$4,941	-\$20,995
Facilities	\$6,061	\$12,245	+\$ 6,184
Indirect	\$19,698	\$10,219	-\$9,479
<b>Basic Program Total Cost</b>	<b>\$264,391</b>	<b>\$226,656</b>	<b>-\$37,735</b>
Additional for Preschool	\$26,306	\$12,186	-\$14,120
Additional for ED	\$42,124	\$56,621	+\$14,497
Additional for R2L	\$98,787	\$ 69,916	-28,871
<b>Total cost for nine classes</b>	<b>\$2,615,166</b>	<b>\$2,247,434</b>	<b>\$-367,732</b>

Note: All recommended increases indicated in the staffing and organization section of this report are included in the above analysis.

In 2008-09, the cost for the county office to provide related services, including occupational therapy and adaptive physical education, to students in district-operated programs was \$119,740. The cost of these related services for 2009-10 is projected to be \$132,595, an increase of \$12,855.

Twenty-nine students received related services in 2008-09, and this number was projected to remain the same for 2009-10. Of these, twelve students receive occupational therapy and nine receive adaptive physical education. The number of students receiving those services may not be sufficient to hire full-time district staff. However it may be beneficial to consider how these and other related services could be provided in collaboration with other districts in northern San Luis Obispo County, thus making it feasible to hire full-time staff. The district has not requested the transfer of any of the other related services such as home/hospital services or the class for medically fragile students.

In addition to the costs enumerated in Table 3, the district will need to consider the following factors when determining the actual cost of operating the transferred special education programs in 2010-11:

- The number of out-of-district students attending each type of class and the amount of reimbursement to the district for those students, to be clarified in a memorandum of understanding (MOU), which is discussed later in this report.
- The possible cost of hiring an occupational therapist and adaptive physical education staff to serve students regionally.
- Costs for special circumstance instructional assistants not included in the basic program projection.
- The possible cost of aides if a new salary schedule and job description is needed for aides in classes for severely handicapped and/or autistic students.
- The cost of any additional classes that may be needed because of the number of students enrolled, based on growth.

As discussed in the staffing and organization section later in this report, the following additional costs must be considered for 2009-2010.

- The cost of hiring a program specialist at a maximum cost of \$85,000 to \$95,000 per year, based on the date of hire.
- Staff development costs, including release time, for administrators, certificated and classified personnel, at an estimated cost of \$20,000.

The data indicate that transferring the nine classes and the two related services to district operation would result in reduced costs for Atascadero Unified School District and other districts in northern San Luis Obispo County that have students in classes operated by Atascadero USD.

### ***Recommendations***

*The district should:*

1. Consider transferring at least the nine classes and the two related services indicated in the letter dated June 30, 2009.
2. Consider hiring the additional staff needed in 2009-10.
3. Begin discussions with the other districts in northern San Luis Obispo County to determine which district, if any, would hire staff to provide related services to district and out-of-district students in Atascadero USD and to students in other north county districts.
4. Determine if there is a need to develop a separate salary schedule and job description for aides in classes for severely handicapped and/or autistic students.
5. Determine the cost effectiveness of transferring programs not included in the letter dated June 30, 2009.

## *Memorandum of Understanding*

The district has expressed its commitment to working with all of the districts in northern San Luis Obispo County to serve all eligible students. The following SELPA guidelines are included in the agreement signed by all member districts. These clarify the general responsibilities of the sending and receiving districts but do not outline the specific processes to be followed:

1. Contracted classes operated by local educational agencies (LEAs) will be run on a fee-for-service model, and no off-the-top allocation will be provided to the LEAs who operate these programs.
2. A district must provide the county office with a year and a day notice of such intent to withdraw from use of county office service(s). The county office and the LEA may mutually agree on a withdrawal date that precedes this maximum.
3. The LEA must provide space for any qualified student in a contracted classroom. Eligibility will be determined by the district offering contracted services, based on published criteria, which is the same for all students provided with the service
4. A LEA which has taken a class/service back from the county office must allow all students who require such class/services to enroll. This includes opening new classes or adding service providers if necessary.
5. Agreements between LEAs concerning services for a specific student will be made based on the parameters established by IEP-determined needs. A MOU on each student will be written after the contracting district establishes that the student is eligible for their program.
6. LEAs agree to involve each other in the development and modification of IEPs for students served under such contracts. The contracting LEA will invite the special education director from the sending LEA to all IEP/ITPs and/or manifestation determinations for students from the sending LEA. The appropriateness of the current placement will be addressed at all IEPs relating to a student covered under this agreement.
7. The contracting LEA is responsible for discipline of all students enrolled in its program.
8. The parties will share the costs involved in expulsion of a student from the sending LEA. If a student is expelled, the sending LEA will be responsible for the prorated daily costs.

The district will need to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) regarding out-of-district students who attend special education programs in the district, and regarding how related services will be provided for students in any north county district program. This MOU is important because it will ensure that all of the points in the SELPA agreement are addressed.

Any MOU that is developed will need to include, but not be limited to, items such as the following:

- Billing processes that include actual costs for salaries and benefits or average costs of salaries and benefits.
- When the district will bill other districts.
- How a student's enrollment date will be considered in billing.
- The responsibility of the sending district to cover the costs for any additional services that their student requires, such as additional aide support and related services.
- The method developed by the districts in northern San Luis Obispo County to open or close a class or program based on the number of students in attendance.
- Clarification regarding related service providers and how a district will be billed for those services.
- Clarification regarding the distribution and collection of Medi-Cal Administrative Activities (MAA) funds.

### ***Recommendations:***

*The district should:*

1. In collaboration with the San Luis Obispo County SELPA and the other districts in the northern part of the county, develop an MOU that clearly defines the cost for an out-of-district student to attend each of the specific programs, using a cost recovery model.
2. Include in the MOU information about how related services are to be provided to students in any program in northern San Luis Obispo County districts and the cost of those services, using a cost recovery model.

### ***Facilities***

The county office currently leases four of the district's classrooms for four of the nine programs the district is considering transferring to district control. The remaining five classes are in classrooms owned by the county office. The county office has indicated that the SELPA districts would continue to lease those five classrooms for three years following the transfer of programs; however, it is not clear if the SELPA district superintendents have ratified this agreement. If the district agrees to this plan, the facilities costs listed in Table 3 above would apply; the costs would need to be revised if the district decides not to lease one or more of the county office-owned classrooms because it has a more centrally located district-owned facility that meets students' needs.

At the time of this report, the district had not completed an inventory of the instructional materials, technology and furnishing in the nine classes under consideration for transfer. Thus there may be additional costs in those areas once the classes are transferred. An

inventory is important because it can prevent confusion, reduce unnecessary costs and help ensure program consistency.

***Recommendation***

*The district should:*

1. Before agreeing to lease classrooms for three more years, inspect each of the classrooms that will be transferred to determine if the class should continue to be housed in its current location or if another location on the campus would meet the students' needs.
2. Complete an inventory of all equipment, materials and curriculum to ensure continuity of program design and delivery.





## *Parent Participation and Communication*

Implicit in national educational Goals 1 and 8 (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, public Law 103-227) is the concept that families and schools are partners in preventing children from failing in school. Family-school relationships have been identified as a primary protective factor for children, particularly those living in high-risk circumstances (Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Children with special needs require a high level of participation and communication between home and school. Parent participation and communication will continue to be essential as the district develops and carries out the transfer of programs from county office to district operation.

District administrators stated that they anticipate benefits from maintaining local control over programs and services, including improving student transitions, streamlining the referral process and providing opportunities for students to participate in district and school programs. They also indicated that district-operated programs would make it possible to provide educational programs and related services in a more cost-effective manner. Administrators expressed appreciation to the county office for providing excellent services to district students in county office-operated programs at district sites.

The district has demonstrated an openness and transparency in sharing information and involving parents, and excellent communication is taking place. Parents have been notified in writing of the district's intent to explore the transition of county-operated special education programs to district control. The district's superintendent conducted community meeting with parents on June 2, 15 and 23 and on August 25, 27 and 31, 2009; an agenda was posted, minutes kept, and plans developed to follow up with parent concerns. Most of the parents who attended the meetings reported that they found out about the meetings through an e-mail from the superintendent; others learned by word of mouth from other parents.

Because the district requested an independent and external agency to meet with parents and listen to their concerns, FCMAT conducted two parent focus meeting from 6-8 p.m. on August 25 and 27, 2009. All parents who attended had an opportunity to express their concerns. The meetings were positive and parents expressed support for the transfer of programs. However, parents also indicated several concerns about how the transfer will improve services and how the district can ensure that quality services are provided.

Parents want to know more about the training provided to staff in preparation for the transition. They are concerned that the current design lacks opportunities to mainstream students and are interested in the plan to resolve this issue. Parents also have concerns about whether students will be treated fairly by other students, staff and site administrators. They would also like information about whether county office staff will have the opportunity to be hired by the district.

Parents of students who reside in other districts but currently attend county office-operated programs in Atascadero USD expressed concerns about options for their children. Continued communication with all parents and the county office will be essential to ensuring an effective change in program management.

Parents and staff expressed support and appreciation for the excellent services the county office has provided. They also indicated that they want to continue resolving program issues of concern but are unclear about the process to do so. The district will need to provide a systematic plan for parents to resolve issues.

Parents seem to understand that program transfers are allowed under Education Code section 56207, which establishes the legal requirements for the transfer of educational programs from one LEA to another within the SELPA.

The district's administration has invited parents to have open and transparent communication throughout the 2009-10 school year regarding the transition and has invited the county office to support parents and students with positive involvement in the transition. The county office has provided valuable services and will be essential to assisting the district and parents in the program transfer.

### **Recommendations**

*The district should:*

1. Develop a question-and-answer information sheet for parents, community, school boards and the district's school staff. Information should include, but not be limited to, the following:
  - An explanation of education code requirements relevant to the transfer.
  - Assurance that students' needs will be met.
  - An outline of the full continuum of services.
  - Staff development activities scheduled for parents and staff.
  - A time line for implementation.
  - References to information on the district's Web site, press releases and new articles in the local newspaper.
2. Continue to contact and interact with parents often to foster trust and communication.
3. Notify each parent about the transition of their child's special education program. Ensure that each principal makes personal contact with the students transferring into the program.
4. Provide frequent updates regarding the transition of special education programs to district staff, school board, parents, community and the press.
5. Ensure that school sites consider the following actions to promote trust and improve communication:
  - Accept parents as they are.
  - Share information and resources.
  - Follow through on promised actions.
  - Discuss objectives openly.

- Prepare for meetings with parents.
  - Explore options for updating parents regarding special education issues through e-mail, telephone contact, parent meetings and other means.
  - Provide training for principals on disability awareness and cultural diversity to ensure that families of students with disabilities feel welcome on the campus.
  - Monitor success at least annually through parent input sessions, surveys or other methods.
  - Encourage parents to visit school sites regularly and talk with principals and teachers regarding their child's education.
  - Ensure that principals take a leadership role in making sure that all children are treated equally and fairly as required by federal and state statutes.
  - Organize each school site so that at least six people know each special education student well. Provide a parent contact person to be responsible for connecting parents and educators at each school site.
6. Continue to provide information to parents whose children are placed in county office-operated programs through a regional transfer.
  7. Establish and communicate a problem-solving process to resolve parent issues related to special education.
  8. Consider conducting diversity training for general education students to build a solid foundation of ownership, compassion and support for new students.



## *Staffing and Organization*

FCMAT reviewed the district's special education organizational structure and staffing using the assumption that the district will transfer nine education programs to district operation. The district does not currently have the administrative infrastructure required to support the transition.

Principals and district staff have a strong sense of ownership and a commitment to students in county office-operated programs, and they recognize the need for training and support to ensure the successful transition of these programs to district operation.

The district does not have any staff who have the expertise in severely handicapped populations that is needed to support specialized programs. The district recognizes the need to create a program specialist position with an emphasis on severely handicapped populations. Appendix A contains a sample job description for such a position.

The district's director of special education has a split assignment divided evenly between work as a school psychologist and supervision of programs for 320 special education students, including responsibility for home/hospital services and Medi-Cal reimbursements of approximately \$30,000 annually. The director also oversees programs for 200 gifted and talented education (GATE) students. The addition of more than 60 students from county office-operated programs will require the district to increase the percentage of time the director spends on special education administrative responsibilities (currently this accounts for approximately 50% of the position's assigned administrative time). Some supervisory duties, such as Medi-Cal and home hospital, could be assigned to another administrator.

The district's psychologist-to-student ratio is 1:1412; the statewide average ratio according to the 2007 California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS) is 1:1328. To meet the needs of the programs transferring to district control, the district will need to consider adding 1.0 full time equivalent (FTE) psychologist position for the 2010-11 school year, as well as a 0.5 FTE behavior intervention specialist.

The district's speech pathologists maintain caseloads averaging from 44 to 46 students. With the transfer of programs and the resulting increase in students for 2010-11, the district will need to consider hiring an additional 1.5 FTE speech pathologists.

Occupational therapy (OT) and nursing needs will have to be determined during the 2009-10 school year, but FCMAT's analysis indicates a need for 1.0 FTE OT position, 1.0 FTE nursing support position and a 0.5 FTE adaptive physical education position for the programs transitioning to district operation. The special education staff have indicated the need for an 11-month clerical position. FCMAT was not able to verify this need and so cannot support the request at this time; however, the district should evaluate this request during the current school year.

Specific tasks for the current school year should include establishing a baseline for the function of all nine programs to be transferred; performing case reviews on all students, including those in regional placements; providing training for parents, principals and

staff; and coordinating all activities with the staff person designated to be in charge of the transition plan.

### ***Recommendations***

*The district should:*

1. Consider increasing the director of special education position to full time beginning in the current school year. Consider reassigning other duties, such as Medical and home/hospital oversight, to another administrator.
2. Consider creating a program specialist position with an emphasis on the severely handicapped population.
3. Designate the current school year as a planning year. Consider hiring the program specialist this school year. Assign the specific tasks listed above for this school year.
4. Consider increasing the number of staff who provide designated instruction services to support students who transition into district programs. Specific staff position increases to consider include 1.0 FTE psychologist, 0.5 FTE behavior intervention specialist, 1.5 FTE speech pathologists, 1.0 FTE nurse, 1.0 FTE occupational therapist and 0.5 FTE adaptive physical education teacher.

# Appendices





# **Appendix A**

## *Program Specialist Job Description*



<p>ATASCADERO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT</p> <p>An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer</p>	<p>Revised: <u>September 21, 2009</u></p>
<p><b>JOB DESCRIPTION</b></p>	<p>Title: <u>Program Specialist</u></p>
<p><b>I. <u>SCOPE OF POSITION:</u></b> Under the direction of the Director of Special Education, organize and direct the operations and activities involved in the development and implementation of the autism/severely handicapped programs and services. Provide consultation, technical assistance and training to administrators, staff, parents and the public concerning autism/severely handicapped programs and related services, standards, requirements and procedures. Coordinate communications, information, curricular resources, staff development activities and personnel to meet student needs and enhance educational effectiveness of autism/severely handicapped programs and services.</p> <p><b>II. <u>ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directly supervise programming and instruction in autism/severely handicapped classes.</li> <li>• Monitor and assess autism/severely handicapped services and programs for educational effectiveness and operational efficiency.</li> <li>• Provide Staff Development training in the area of autism/severely handicapped for administrators, parents, teachers, and aides.</li> <li>• Facilitate the referrals for all social/emotional services within the school system and community.</li> <li>• Serve as a liaison and coordinate autism/severely handicapped programs, services, communications and student information between administrators, personnel, parents, school districts, outside organizations, governmental agencies and the public.</li> <li>• Ability to build and maintain strong and effective communication skills with parents, staff and agencies (Mental Health, Regional Center, etc.).</li> <li>• Develop curriculum for autism/severely handicapped classes.</li> <li>• Assist with the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEP).</li> <li>• Serve as administrator designee at IEP meetings.</li> <li>• Design and implement applied methodology for all autism/severely handicapped classrooms.</li> <li>• Monitor student progress and program effectiveness.</li> <li>• Implementation of conflict management training.</li> <li>• Assist in assuring adequate personnel and resources for autism/severely handicapped programs; review staffing levels and service delivery models and recommend modifications as appropriate.</li> </ul> <p><b>III. <u>TYPICAL DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist Principal in identifying the social/emotional needs of the students.</li> <li>• Assist in assuring related activities comply with established standards, requirements, laws, codes, regulations, policies and procedures.</li> <li>• Provide assistance to staff members in interpreting the abilities and needs of individual pupils.</li> <li>• Provide Professional Development.</li> <li>• Facilitate Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings.</li> <li>• Good organizational skills with effective time management.</li> <li>• Flexibility with various programs and various sites.</li> <li>• Assist Principal with data collections and interpretation.</li> <li>• Recommend adjustments in the school environment when needed to provide for student success.</li> <li>• Assist Principal in maximizing resources.</li> <li>• Organize and distribute supplemental instructional materials and resources.</li> <li>• Perform other duties as assigned.</li> </ul>	

**IV. EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE:**

- Valid, California Specialist Instruction Credential for Severely Handicapped, or California Educational Specialist for Moderate/Severely Handicapped, Required
- Minimum of five years teaching and or supervision experience in severely handicapped programs, Required
- Evidence of autism training and experience working with students with autism
- Knowledge and/or understanding of Conflict Management
- Appropriate ELL Authorization, Required; (CLAD or equivalent)
- Ability to Pass DOJ Background/Fingerprint Check, Required
- Masters Degree, Preferred

**V. PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS / WORKING CONDITIONS:**

Of this position are, but not limited to the following:

- Stand and walk for extended periods of time. Ascend and descend steps.
- Read and write at the level required for successful job performance.
- See for the purpose of reading laws and codes, rules and policies, and other related matter.
- Hear and understand speech at normal levels.
- Communicate so others will clearly understand normal conversation and on the telephone.
- Bend, twist, kneel and/or stoop and reach in all directions.
- Lift and carry 25 pounds.
- Think clearly and rationally to solve problems.

**VI. SUPERVISION:**

Under the immediate supervision of the Director of Special Education.

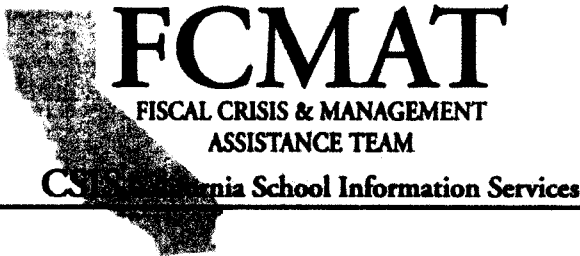
**VII. EVALUATION:**

Job performance will be evaluated by the Director of Special Education.

# Appendix B

## *Study Agreement*





FISCAL CRISIS & MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM  
STUDY AGREEMENT  
July 21, 2009

The FISCAL CRISIS AND MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM (FCMAT), hereinafter referred to as the Team, and the Atascadero 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 school districts and county offices of education upon request. The District has requested that the Team provide for the assignment of professionals to study specific aspects of the Atascadero Unified School District operations. These professionals may include staff of the Team, County Offices of Education, the California State Department of Education, school districts, or private contractors. All work shall be performed in accordance with the terms and conditions of this Agreement.

2. SCOPE OF THE WORK

A. Scope and Objectives of the Study

The scope and objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Determine if it would be cost effective for the District to operate special education programs for students with special needs rather than contracting with the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (SLOCOE) to provide certain specialized services.
- 2) Review the organizational structure and staffing of the districts special education programs and services and provide recommendations for restructuring if the District plans to take back programs from the SLOCOE.

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 staff on the procedures of the Team and on the purpose and schedule of the study.
- 2) On-site Review - The Team will conduct on-site meetings at the District office to gather documentation and conduct interviews. The Team will request assistance from the District in setting up interview schedules with staff.
- 3) Progress Reports - The Team will hold an exit meeting at the conclusion of the on-site reviews to inform the District representatives of significant findings and recommendations to that point.
- 4) Exit Letter - The Team will issue an exit letter approximately 10 days after the exit meeting detailing significant findings and recommendations to date and memorializing the topics discussed in the exit meeting.
- 5) Draft Reports - Sufficient copies of a preliminary draft report will be delivered to the District administration for review and comment.
- 6) Final Report - Sufficient copies of the final study report will be delivered to the District following completion of the review.
- 7) Follow-Up Support – Six months after the completion of the study, FCMAT will return to the District, if requested, to confirm the District’s progress in implementing the recommendations included in the report, at no costs. Status of the recommendations will be documented to the District in a FCMAT Management Letter.



3. PROJECT PERSONNEL

The study team will be supervised by Anthony L. Bridges, Deputy Executive Officer, Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, Kern County Superintendent of Schools Office. The study team may also include:

- A. Dr. William Gillaspie, FCMAT Chief Management Analyst
- B. JoAnn Murphy, FCMAT Special Education Consultant
- C. Anne Stone, FCMAT Special Education Consultant

Other equally qualified consultants will be substituted in the event one of the above noted individuals is unable to participate in the study.

4. PROJECT COSTS

The cost for studies requested pursuant to E.C. 42127.8(d)(1) shall be:

- A. \$500.00 per day for each Team Member, while on site, conducting fieldwork at other locations, preparing and presenting reports, or participating in meetings.
- B. All out-of-pocket expenses, including travel, meals, lodging, etc. Based on the elements noted in section 2 A, the total cost of the study is estimated at \$14,000. 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 acceptance of the final report by the District.
- C. Any change to the scope will affect the estimate of total cost.

Payments for FCMAT services are payable to Kern County Superintendent of Schools-Administrative Agent.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE DISTRICT

- A. The District will provide office and conference room space while on-site reviews are in progress.
- B. The District will provide the following (if requested):
  - 1) A map of the local area
  - 2) Existing policies, regulations and prior reports addressing the study request
  - 3) Current organizational charts
  - 4) Current and four (4) prior year's audit reports
  - 5) Any documents requested on a supplemental listing

- C. The District Administration will review a preliminary draft copy of the study. Any comments regarding the accuracy of the data presented in the report or the practicability of the recommendations will be reviewed with the Team prior to completion of the final report.

Pursuant to EC 45125.1(c), representatives of FCMAT will have limited contact with District 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 key study milestones:

The on-site portion of the review is tentatively scheduled for August 25-27, 2009.

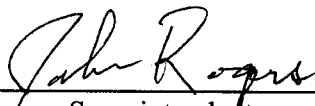
Orientation:	to be determined
Staff Interviews:	to be determined
Exit Interviews:	to be determined
Preliminary Report Submitted:	Six weeks following end of on-site work
Final Report Submitted:	to be determined
Board Presentation:	to be determined
Follow-Up Support:	If requested

7. CONTACT PERSON


Please print name of contact person: Jackie Martin  
Assistant Superintendent of Business

Telephone 805 462-4200 FAX 805 466-2941

Internet Address jmartin@atas.k12.ca.us

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
John Rogers, Superintendent  
Atascadero Unified School District

7-21-09  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara (Dean) Murphy  
Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team

July 21, 2009  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

In keeping with the provisions of AB1200, the County Superintendent will be notified of this agreement between the District and FCMAT and will receive a copy of the final report.