



CSIS *California School Information Services*

Atwater Elementary School District

Special Education Review

May 24, 2011



Joel D. Montero
Chief Executive Officer





CSIS California School Information Services

May 24, 2011

Melinda Hennes, Superintendent
Atwater Elementary School District
1401 Broadway Avenue
Atwater, CA 95301

Dear Superintendent Hennes:

In February 2011 the Atwater Elementary School District and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) entered into an agreement to provide a review of the district's special education programs and services. Specifically, the agreement stated that FCMAT would perform the following:

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the special education delivery system and determine how the program can be more cost efficient. The review will include recommendations to reduce the level of contributions from the unrestricted general fund and continue to sustain the quality of services and meet the legal requirements of the program.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the staffing process for certificated staff and classroom aides including class size ratios and provide recommendations, if needed.
3. Review the district's implementation of the Response to Intervention Model (RtI) and provide recommendations, if any.
4. Review district student study team process and make recommendations to improve efficiency.
5. Review the criteria for speech identification and exit criteria and make recommendations if needed.
6. Review speech caseloads and RSP caseloads and make recommendations if needed.
7. Review special education administration (district level position). Review districts of similar size and determine whether it is typical to have a director of special education position (or something similar) specifically restricted to special education or an administrative position that manages other areas of operation in addition to special education. Make recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

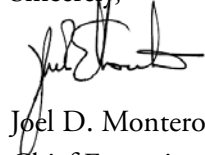
FCMAT

Joel D. Montero, Chief Executive Officer

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This final report contains the study team's findings and recommendations in the above areas of review. We appreciate the opportunity to serve the Atwater Elementary School District, and extend our thanks to all the staff for their assistance during fieldwork.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joel D. Montero', written over a horizontal line.

Joel D. Montero
Chief Executive Officer

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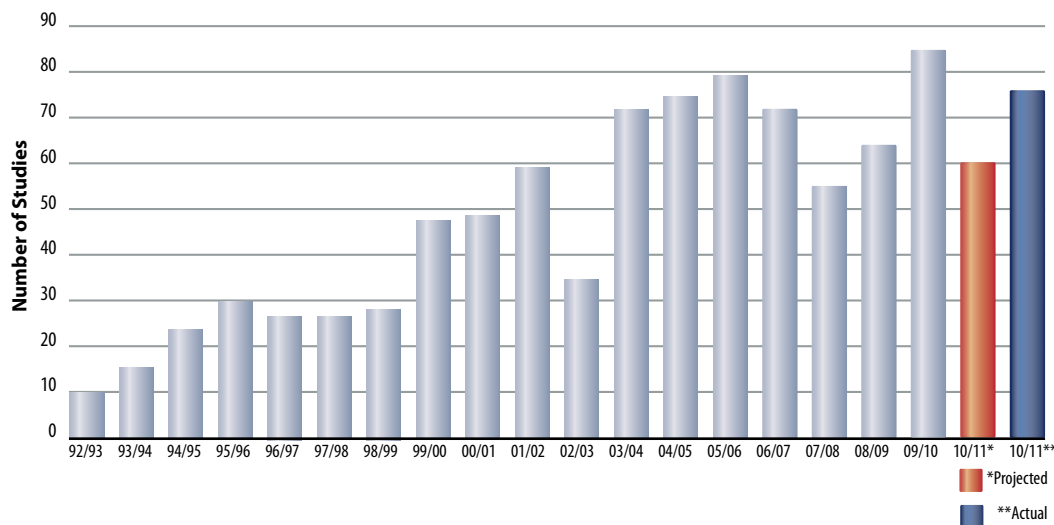
About FCMAT

FCMAT's primary mission is to assist California's local K-14 educational agencies to identify, prevent, and resolve financial 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 and efficient operations. FCMAT's data management services are used to help local educational agencies (LEAs) meet state reporting responsibilities, improve data quality, and share information.

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 local education agency 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 also develops and provides numerous publications, software tools, workshops and professional development opportunities to help local educational agencies operate more effectively and fulfill their fiscal oversight and data management responsibilities. The California School Information Services (CSIS) arm of FCMAT assists the California Department of Education with the implementation of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) and also maintains DataGate, the FCMAT/CSIS software LEAs use for CSIS services. FCMAT was created by Assembly Bill 1200 in 1992 to assist LEAs to meet and sustain their financial obligations. Assembly Bill 107 in 1997 charged FCMAT with responsibility for CSIS and its statewide data management work. Assembly Bill 1115 in 1999 codified CSIS' mission.

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

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 850 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 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.

Introduction

Background

The Atwater Elementary School District is located in Merced County and has an enrollment of 4,505. The district operates seven elementary schools, one middle school and one community day school. Thirty-five percent of the district's students are identified as English learners; the district average in Merced County is 24.4%. In the 2010-11 fiscal year approximately 8% of the district's general education enrollment is identified as requiring special education services, which is below the statewide average of 10%.

The district used American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to reduce the unrestricted general fund contribution to nearly 0% for the current fiscal year and anticipates a 16% contribution for 2011-12. The state average general fund contribution is 30%.

In December 2011 the district requested FCMAT to review its special education programs and services. The study agreement specifies that FCMAT will perform the following:

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the special education delivery system and determine how the program can be more cost efficient. The review will include recommendations to reduce the level of contributions from the unrestricted general fund while sustaining the quality of services and meeting the legal requirements of the program.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the staffing process for certificated staff and classroom aides including class size ratios, and provide recommendations, if needed.
3. Review the district's implementation of the Response to Intervention model (RTI) and provide recommendations, if any.
4. Review district student study team process and make recommendations to improve efficiency.
5. Review the criteria for speech identification and exit criteria and make recommendations if needed.
6. Review speech and RSP caseloads and make recommendations if needed.
7. Review special education administration (district level position). Review districts of similar size and determine whether it is typical to have a director of special education position (or something similar) specifically restricted to special education or an administrative position that manages other areas of operation in addition to special education. Make recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Study Guidelines

FCMAT visited the district on March 14-16, 2011 to conduct interviews, collect data and review documents. This report is the result of those activities and is divided into the following sections:

- Executive Summary
- Delivery System
- Staffing and Caseloads
- Response to Intervention
- Student Study Teams
- Speech Identification/Exit
- Management Staffing

Study Team

The study team was composed of the following members:

William P. Gillaspie, Ed. D.
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Executive Summary

The district's unrestricted general fund contribution for special education is below the statewide average. The district has used ARRA funds to reduce the general fund contribution to nearly 0% for the current school year and anticipates a 16% general fund contribution for the 2011-12 school year. The state average general fund contribution is 30%.

The district provides a comprehensive range of programs and services for special education students. The traditional program delivery system offers county-provided special day class (SDC) settings for the moderate to severely disabled students and district programs for the mild to moderate disabilities. One hundred one special education students are served outside the district, 93 of them through the Merced County Office of Education. Funding for Merced COE programs is based on the district's average daily attendance and is distributed first out of the special education allocation. Therefore, the district is not financially penalized for having more students in county programs, nor would it be beneficial to the district to provide those programs and services.

The elementary schools each serve 3% to 5.4% of students in resource specialist programs, which is consistent with statewide identification rates. The junior high serves 5.8%. Resource specialists also serve a number of non-identified students as part of the district's Response to Intervention (RtI) model. Including these students in the caseload would substantially increase the percentage. The district's special education teachers do not always have adequate time to provide the intensive instruction required by their students.

In 2009-10, 36.2% of the district's special education students scored proficient in English-language arts and 42.9% scored proficient in math. The English-language arts percentage did not meet state criteria but the math percentage did. The district should carefully review the many factors that can affect student achievement for this population. Access to the core curriculum is not consistent for all SDC programs. Most SDC students are integrated with age appropriate peers for recess, lunch and assemblies; however, increased class size in general education has limited the access special education students have to core curriculum classes. Students often are required to transfer between schools as they change grade levels.

The mild to moderate special day classes average 16 students, which exceeds the statewide average of 12-15. The staffing formula for instructional aides in the SDC classrooms is one aide per class, which is consistent with the statewide average.

The district's resource specialists have an average caseload of 20 students, well within the Education Code Section 56362(c) limit of 28. It is also consistent with the average RSP caseload in the Merced County SELPA. In addition to identified students, RSP teachers support clinicians, teach strategic classes and serve non-identified students; however, these students are not included in the caseload count. The instructional aide staffing ratio for resource specialists is within the Education Code standard.

The ratio of general education (K-8) students to psychologists is 1958:1; the statewide average reported by the California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS) is 1328:1.

The district's average caseload for language, speech and hearing specialists is 59 identified students. This does not include additional students served through the speech improvement class that is provided through the RtI model, or additional services provided through the language intervention groups in general education classes. The average caseload for DIS speech is higher

than specified in Education Code Section 56363.3; however, this district decision was supported through an MOU with the teachers' union that included additional compensation.

Education Code Section 56441.7 sets a maximum caseload limit of 40 students for language and hearing specialists serving preschool. The .8 FTE preschool language, speech and hearing specialist has a caseload of 32, which is within the legal requirement.

The district has implemented an RtI model in response to the major changes in student achievement and accountability outlined in the No Child Left Behind (2001) Act and further supported by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004. The implementation of RtI is not consistent districtwide. Greater consistency will be achieved with the use of data to measure student success, establishing benchmarks for student progress measured both before and after intervention.

The district has a student success team (SST) handbook and appropriate forms to be completed to refer students to the SST. A tracking document includes all data regarding interventions, but no specific test data regarding pre- or post-test performance and student progress. Use of the document is inconsistent among district schools.

The district does not have specific criteria for identifying students with speech and language disabilities, but relies on the Education Code criteria.

Compared to the other SELPA districts, the district overidentifies students as speech and language impaired. The percentage of district students identified for speech and language is 4.05% of the general education population; the SELPA average is 2.3%.

The percentage of district special education students identified as speech and language impaired is 49%, which exceeds the SELPA average of 28%. The district has exited 67 students from speech and language during the 2010-11 school year. The number of exited students for all Merced SELPA districts was not available.

The district eliminated the director of special education position at the end of the 2008-09 fiscal year for budgetary reasons. The position has not been filled since that time. The duties have been assigned to the assistant superintendent of educational services, who retains primary responsibility for curriculum and instruction, testing, English learning, library program, instructional technology, categorical and program improvement, preschool, health services, and professional development.

Compared to districts of similar enrollment (Rio, Centralia, Oakley, Ravenswood), only Atwater does not have an administrator directly assigned to supervise special education. Two of the four administrative positions in comparable districts have primary responsibility for special education. The other two positions have additional responsibilities.

Findings and Recommendations

Delivery System

The district maintains a general fund contribution for special education that is below the state-wide average of 30%. The district has decreased the unrestricted general fund contribution while continuing to meet the maintenance of effort requirements and deliver high-quality educational services to its students.

The district has used ARRA funds to reduce the general fund contribution to nearly 0% for the 2010-11 fiscal year and estimates the general fund contribution to be 16% for 2011-12. This increase is largely due to the elimination of the special disabilities funds that had been available to the Merced Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA).

In addition to the use of ARRA funds, the district's low general fund contribution is attributable to minimal outside contracts, no litigation, a low percentage of district students identified for special education, and allocations from the SELPA plan.

Many California school districts contract with state-certified nonpublic agencies (NPAs) to provide services such as occupational therapy or speech when the district's own employees cannot provide those services. In Atwater, all speech services are provided by district employees, and the Merced COE provides related services such as occupational therapy. Therefore, the district has no nonpublic agency contracts at this time.

A nonpublic school (NPS) enrolls students with exceptional needs pursuant to an individualized education program (IEP), employs at least one full-time teacher who holds an appropriate credential authorizing special education services, and is state-certified. The district has one nonpublic school contract for two of its students, which is typical for a district of this size. What is beneficial in this case is the Merced COE role in placing students in an NPS and the SELPA financial support for those placements. Merced COE provides most classes for students with emotional disturbance and severe disabilities. Therefore, when a student requires a more intensive NPS placement, Merced COE is on the IEP team. The SELPA then reimburses the district for 80% of the cost of that placement.

The nonpublic school contract costs \$129.69/day for 180 days. The determination of whether a student will attend the extended school year (ESY) portion of the program is made at an IEP meeting in the spring and is a separate contract. The cost for the school year program is \$23,344.20. The final cost to the district after the SELPA reimbursement is \$4,668.84, assuming the student does not attend the ESY program.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides for mediation and due process to resolve disputes related to the education of disabled children. This is to ensure that each child receives a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The district has had no due process filings in the past two years and therefore no litigation costs.

The criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of a special education program are defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA includes the requirement that schools provide a free and appropriate public education (Title 23, Code of Federal Regulations, 300.101 through 300.120) to each student with a disability in the least restrictive environment. FAPE is defined as an educational program that is individualized to a specific child, designed to meet the child's unique needs, and from which the child receives educational benefit. Least restrictive environ-

ment ensures that, to the maximum extent appropriate, handicapped students are educated with those who are not handicapped. IDEA further states that a student should be removed from general education only when the severity of the handicap is such that education cannot be achieved satisfactorily in the general education classes with the use of supplemental aids and services. The legislation does permit a student to be placed in a setting outside the general education environment to ensure that the student's IEP can be implemented.

The district serves 103 special education students in outside programs. This includes the two students in the nonpublic school. Two students attend a Head Start program, six students attend other districts' programs and 93 students are in a Merced COE program.

Funding for the Merced COE programs is provided through the SELPA allocation plan. Program operating costs are charged to each district based on average daily attendance (ADA). Therefore, a district is charged the same amount for the Merced COE programs no matter how many students participate. In many county offices, charges are assessed per child for either actual costs or excess costs. A district incurs no financial penalty for placing students in Merced COE programs; in fact, an additional cost would be incurred if a district took back students now served in a Merced COE program.

The district does incur additional costs for transporting students to the Merced COE programs. District-provided information indicates that the current estimate of \$175,000 for transportation will increase next year. The district's special education students travel to approximately 13 different Merced COE sites. Which site a student attends is determined by the IEP and Merced COE.

Merced COE operates the infant program for all districts in the SELPA. Staff reported that students in the infant program often are placed in a Merced COE preschool program and then in a Merced COE K-22 program. This is not unusual or inappropriate. However, it may result in less district involvement in the IEP process than would normally occur. District staff attend Merced COE IEPs when necessary. For example, when a student will return to the district or needs a more restrictive placement such as an NPS, the district makes every attempt to attend the IEP.

The district classifies its special education teachers as resource specialists and special day class teachers. In some districts, these positions are classified as specialized academic instruction teachers, with blended caseloads and responsibilities. Many resource specialists in the Atwater ESD are responsible for their own caseload, which includes scheduling and delivering academic instruction, and scheduling and coordinating reading clinicians who provide response to intervention (RtI) activities. The responsibility for the clinicians is shared with the site principal at some sites.

At other sites, the resource specialist is also responsible for providing direct instruction to general education students through strategic classes. These are generally considered Tier II RtI interventions. Teaching these classes can take several hours of the teaching day, leaving the direct instruction of some special education students to the aides.

Staff reported that resource specialists regularly include general education students in their pull-out resource classes. The general education students can be in the resource class for a short period of time or as long as a school year. In some cases the decision to place the student in the resource class is made through the student success team, but in many cases it is an agreement between the resource specialist and the classroom teacher.

One site operates what is referred to as a learning center. A learning center usually has three main purposes:

- To teach strategies
- To provide intensive direct instruction
- To monitor student progress

A learning center generally is staffed by special educators, designated instruction providers, categorical staff, general education teachers and aides. Students with IEPs that require a level of direct instruction and support beyond that provided in the general education classroom may receive services in the learning center. The center allows for flexibility in service provision. One student may receive intervention for a short, intense period of time whereas another student may require a lengthier intervention. Teachers use ongoing progress monitoring to help determine the level of instructional support each student requires. The district does not operate this type of learning center but does designate one special education teacher with a combined caseload of resource and special day students to also serve a number of general education students.

The elementary schools each serve 3.1% to 4.7% and the junior high serves 5.8% of their students in the resource program. If the general education students who are provided direct instruction by the resource specialist at the elementary schools were included, these percentages would be much higher. The number of general education students who receive special education services was not available, so percentages could not be calculated.

Students in special day classes (SDCs) are approximately 2% of the district's enrollment. This could not be calculated by school because each school does not have SDCs for all grade levels. Staff reported several reasons for the higher number of students: some students are referred to an SDC or remain in that placement when the numbers of both identified and non-identified students exceed what the resource specialist can accommodate. Some of the students in the SDCs have more significant academic and behavioral needs than those in the resource program.

Staff reported that there is less mainstreaming of the SDC students this year than in the past. For many of these students, their only opportunities to interact with the general education students are recess, lunch and assemblies. Staff also reported that the increase in the general education class size is the main reason for less mainstreaming. There have also been fewer opportunities for students in the SDCs to receive academic instruction from the resource specialist. The effect of reduced mainstreaming opportunities and increased time in the SDC on the overall academic achievement of the SDC students is unknown at this time.

Even when the percentage of identified special education students is at or below the state average, the overidentification of students in one or more categories can be a concern.

The December 1, 2009 California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) data showed 382 special education students served by the district, or 8% of the district enrollment. An additional 78 special education students received their special education services outside the district. The total of 460 special education students equaled 10.1% of enrollment. The state average for that year was 10.99%. The following table compares the percentage of students served both in the district (DOS) and the percentage of students served both in the district and outside the district (DOR) with the state percentage. Two areas of disability, deaf/blind and multiple disability, were not included in the chart because their numbers were negligible.

	Mental Retardation	Hard of Hearing	Deaf	Speech or Language Impairment	Visual Impairment	Emotional Disturbance	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impaired	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Specific Learning Disability
DOR	4.4	.07	.0	48.9	.002	1.0	2.9	3.7	3.4	.5	34.3
DOS	6.5	.8	1.3	42.2	.9	1.9	3.7	5.0	7.4	.4	29.6
State	6.3	1.3	6.1	24.7	.6	4.0	2.3	7.9	8.7	.7	42.3

In most eligibility categories, the district has identified a lower percentage of students than the state average. However, the district identified 24.2% more students in speech or language impairment than the state average.

District data shows that identifications in the speech category have decreased from 187 to 152 students. However, identifications for specific learning disability increased from 131 to 196 students. Staff stated the reasons for these changes were: 1) students who no longer qualified for speech services were exited and 2) some students were reclassified, after further assessment, to the specific learning disability category.

The district purchased a special education reading curriculum two years ago that was implemented by the special education teachers; however, a curriculum was not determined for students who did not make progress. The special education teachers use a variety of curricula for those students, including core curriculum, supplemental curriculum aligned to the core, or other supplemental curriculum. The use of such a variety of materials leads to instructional inconsistencies among the classes.

Another gauge of special education program effectiveness is how students perform on state testing and district benchmarks. The Academic Performance Index (API) reflects a district or subgroup's academic performance level based on the results of statewide testing. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools or subgroups. Special education in the Atwater ESD meets the criteria for its API subgroup.

The percentage of special education students scoring proficient in state testing for the 2009-10 school year was 36.2% in English-language arts and 42.9% in math. Specific scores for previous years are not available on the state website for comparison. However, the district should review its scores in evaluating the academic instruction provided to special education students.

Student access to the core curriculum and supplemental curriculum can contribute to student performance on statewide testing. The inconsistency of the SDC curriculum, the large SDC class sizes, and structure of the resource program all may impact the effectiveness of the special education program.

The physical placement of the SDCs necessitates that students change schools either at the third or fourth grade and then again at the sixth or seventh grade. Locations of the special day classes are chosen so that no one school is impacted. However, it means that special day class students cannot stay at one elementary school for their elementary years in the same way as their general education peers. This may not be avoidable.

In previous years the special education teachers met regularly as a staff. Meeting topics included changes in forms, regulations, and procedures. The reading curriculum was selected and discussions were held regarding students, other curricula, and program implementation. This year, only a few meetings have been held for special education teachers to comply with the special education self-review.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Continue to serve students in the appropriate Merced COE programs and nonpublic schools.
2. Attend as many Merced COE IEPs as possible. When this is not feasible, carefully review IEPs to determine student needs, ages, and other pertinent information that will allow appropriate planning for students returning to the district.
3. Determine how many students the special education teachers instruct and the nature and duration of special education services that general education students receive. Conduct these reviews monthly. Utilize the student success team process to assign students to a special education teacher for a specific RtI intervention.
4. Review how RtI Tier I and Tier II activities are implemented to ensure that special education teachers have adequate time in their day to provide the intensive instruction required by the students assigned to them.
5. Review each special education teacher's and speech therapist's caseloads to ensure that students are appropriately placed. Continue the efforts begun this year to redesignate, exit, and move students between programs as appropriate.
6. Ensure that each student assigned to a special day class is mainstreamed into general education or resource classes to the maximum extent appropriate.
7. Review each special education student's state test scores and correlate the instructional curriculum with the student's areas of deficit.
8. Determine what curricula will be used with students for whom the current supplemental reading program is not successful, and what other curricula will be used in the special education classes to ensure a consistent academic program.
9. Review the physical placement of all special education classes to ensure that a) students change schools as infrequently as possible, and b) transportation is consolidated whenever possible to reduce costs.
10. Reinstitute special education staff meetings to review legal updates, share curriculum and strategies, and provide staff with opportunities to collaborate.

Staffing and Caseloads

The district requested FCMAT to review special education department staffing ratios. Comparative statewide survey data is available to help analyze assignments in most staffing areas. This data was compiled by School Services of California, Inc. (SSC) and is used by districts across the state. The legal caseload requirements of Education Code Part 30 also were used in FCMAT's analysis.

The caseloads for mild to moderate SDC classes have an average size of 16, which exceeds the statewide average of 12-15. The staffing ratio for instructional aides in special day classes is within the statewide practice and guidelines.

The ratio of general education (K-8) students to psychologists is 1958:1, which exceeds the statewide average reported through CBEDS (California Basic Education Data System) of 1328:1. It is possible that many districts are operating at higher levels at this time because of California's fiscal crisis.

The average caseload for the district's resource specialists is 20 students, which does not exceed the maximum caseload defined in Education Code Section 56361.5. It is also consistent with the average RSP caseload of 21 students in Merced County. In addition to their caseloads, RSP teachers support clinicians, teach strategic classes and serve nonidentified students as part of the district's RtI model. These numbers are not calculated into the overall caseload but should be considered in staffing decisions for RSP. Instructional aide staffing for resource specialists is within the Education Code standard.

The district's average caseload for language, speech and hearing specialists is 59 identified students. This does not include additional students served through the speech improvement class that is provided through the RtI model, or additional services provided through the language intervention groups in general education classes. During the 2010-11 school year the district has been unable to fill an open position for a language, speech and hearing specialist. The average caseload for DIS speech is higher than specified in Education Code Section 56363.3; however, this district decision was supported through an MOU with the teachers' union that included that a stipend of \$5,000 per year for each of four language, speech and hearing specialists. This is in effect for only the 2010-11 school year. The district will fill the position in the 2011-12 school year.

Education Code Section 56441.7 sets a maximum caseload limitation of 40 students for language and hearing specialists serving preschool. The .8 FTE preschool language, speech and hearing specialist has a caseload of 32, which is within the legal requirement.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Continue the current staffing for mild to moderate SDC classes.
2. Develop strategies to exit students from speech and language services as appropriate.
3. Maintain current staffing for school psychologists.
4. Maintain current RSP staffing but do not allow caseloads to drop below 20 students.
5. Implement one of three options for staffing for language, speech and hearing specialists:
 - a. Maintain staffing at 4.0 FTE language speech and hearing specialists and extend the MOU agreement with a stipend for increased caseloads.
 - b. Replace the open 1.0 FTE position, bringing staffing to 5.0 FTE. Maintain 1.0 FTE in preschool (.8 in direct service and .2 in program coordination).
 - c. Replace the open 1.0 FTE, dedicating the position to full-time direct preschool speech and language services. Consider adding .2 FTE to meet the requirements for program coordination with transitions from preschool into kindergarten.
6. Continue current staffing for instructional aides in both special day class and resource specialist program settings.

Response to Intervention

The district's site administrators and special education teachers have a good understanding of Response to Intervention (RtI), including the RtI Pyramid and tiered interventions. The district is consistent in providing interventions for students, with the exception of reading clinicians. The schools hire reading clinicians to provide reading instruction to students in addition to what the classroom teacher provides. Since they are paid through site funds, not all schools provide this level of intervention.

Although sites need flexibility to address specific instructional needs, common interventions and criteria are necessary to determine which students are provided which interventions. The role of the resource specialist is different at each elementary school and at the junior high. At some elementary schools the resource specialist is a key provider of specialized instruction to general education students. At other elementary schools the resource specialist provides pull-out services for a few general education students who are then included in the special education program. At the junior high school, the resource specialists provide scheduled classes and, when possible, support special education students in the general education classes.

The district is also inconsistent in determining common criteria for evaluating RtI interventions. Staff reported that although all sites use testing and benchmark data, they do not all use the same data in the same way. Further, not all students receiving interventions undergo pre-testing, regular testing and post-testing. At some sites that provide reading clinicians, the clinicians do not regularly report student progress to the student's general education teacher.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Review all current Tier I and Tier II interventions and determine:
 - a. Which staff, including the resource specialist, currently provides these interventions and
 - b. The effectiveness of each intervention based on pre- and post-testing and state test scores.
2. Determine how strategic interventions provided by the resource specialist can continue while ensuring that the identified special education students receive the intensive instruction required by their IEPs.
3. Ensure that all students are tested before, during, and after receiving an RtI intervention.
4. Ensure that the reading clinicians provide regular student progress reports to the site administrator and general education teacher.

Student Study Teams

A student study or student success team (SST) is a school-based problem-solving group whose purpose is to assist teachers in instruction, curriculum, classroom management and behavior management. SSTs organize the resources available at a school site into a system for identifying and solving the problems encountered when students do not progress at a satisfactory rate or demonstrate behavioral challenges in the general education environment.

The district's Student Success Team Handbook includes suggested forms to be completed when referring a student to the SST. The flowchart in the handbook indicates that a student's needs are first discussed at grade level meetings prior to a SST meeting. All sites report that they follow the structured SST process with prior grade level meetings, and use the forms developed by the district. The handbook has not been reviewed by site administrators in several years.

Some sites have implemented a "green folder" to contain the SST documents and provide specific student information. The folder has space on it to document RtI interventions, test scores, etc. Although there is an area labeled "results," this could be interpreted as a general statement of progress or lack of progress rather than specific data regarding results. Since only some sites are familiar with or use the green folder, not all sites have reviewed the information in the folder for completeness.

SST information is not kept with the student's permanent file and therefore may not be transferred when a student moves within the district or leaves the district.

The resource specialist either coordinates the SST team or is a sitting member of the SST team. Psychologists only attend SST meetings when requested to do so by the site administrator. Some site staff stated that the psychologist is an important member of the team and should attend more frequently.

Staff reported that within the last two years most of the referrals made for special education qualified for services. This was attributed to the RtI interventions that students participate in prior to referral. However, in 2009-10, 29% of the referrals to special education did not qualify for services. This percentage is consistent with other districts that FCMAT reviewed that were not implementing RtI interventions.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Review the SST handbook with all site administrators, make changes as appropriate such as including the green folder as part of the SST documentation, and then train all site certificated staff on the handbook.
2. Review the data in the green folder and make changes as needed such as:
 - a. Under the testing section, include the past two years of CST, CELDT and any other pertinent scores in addition to the current year.
 - b. Change the section regarding the results of interventions to specify pre- and post- data.

- c. Change the section of school history from “Does this child receive any special services?” to “Does this child or has this child received any special services?”
 - d. Include specific information from the grade level meeting so that a complete history of interventions is accessible to all future SSTs.
- 3. Ensure that the SST folder is kept in a central location and forwarded with a student’s cumulative file when a student changes schools or leaves the district.
- 4. Continue resource specialist involvement in SSTs, but assign principals to coordinate the teams.
- 5. Continue inviting the school psychologist to SST meetings as needed.
- 6. Collect and review data comparing the students referred for special education assessment to those who qualify for those services to determine trends at specific school sites and the correlation between eligibility and interventions.

Speech Identification/Exit

The district does not maintain specific criteria for identifying students with speech and language disabilities. The staff uses guidelines found in Education Code 56333 and regulations (5 CCR 3030 (3)) that specify the criteria for identifying articulation, abnormal voice, fluency and language disorders. The preschool assessment team uses the communication severity scales developed by the North Inland Special Education Region.

The district identifies 4.05% of its general education population as speech and language impaired, which exceeds the SELPA-wide average of 2.3%. The district should consider adopting the communication severity scales for use in the K-12 identification process.

The district identifies 49% of its special education students as speech and language impaired, which exceeds the SELPA average of 28%. A comparison of preschool students identified for special education indicates that the district exceeds the percentage of the Merced County SELPA but is at or below the statewide average over the last three years. Most preschool referrals to special education are for speech and language.

Percentages of preschool students

School Year	Atwater District	Merced County	California
2007-08	4%	4%	6%
2008-09	5%	4%	6%
2009-10	6.2%	4%	6%

Source Dataquest, California Department of Education

The district has exited 67 students from speech and language during the 2010-11 school year; no comparative data was available for exited students in the Merced SELPA.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Audit caseloads of language, speech and hearing specialists to ensure strict adherence to SELPA entrance criteria.
2. Gather comparative data from the Merced SELPA on its exit rate to general education for speech impaired students.
3. Review SELPA data on exit rates to general education to determine if the district exits students from speech and language services at a rate consistent with local districts.
4. Create firm criteria for establishing eligibility for speech and language services using the communication severity scales.

Management Staffing

The district eliminated the director of special education position at the end of the 2008-09 fiscal year for budgetary reasons. The position has not been filled since that time. The duties have been assigned to the assistant superintendent of educational services, who retains primary responsibility for curriculum and instruction, testing, English learning, library program, instructional technology, categorical and program improvement, preschool, health services, and professional development.

Compared to districts of similar enrollment (Rio, Centralia, Oakley, Ravenswood), only Atwater does not have an administrator directly assigned to supervise special education.

Administrative structure in districts of comparable size

District	Enrollment	Administrative Structure
Atwater	4505	No administration
Centralia	4566	Asst. Supt., Special Education
Oakley	4662	Coordinator, Student Services
Rio	4423	Director, Pupil Personnel/Special Education
Ravenswood	4385	Director, Education 6 Program Coordinators

Source: Dataquest, California Department of Education and district report

Two of the four administrative positions in comparable districts have primary responsibility for special education. The other two positions have additional responsibilities like pupil personnel and 504 plans that detail the modifications and accommodations needed by a special education student.

Recommendations

The district should:

1. Consider reinstating the administrative position for special education. Three options for consideration include:
 - a. Reinstatement of the full-time director of special education position
 - b. Reinstatement of the director of special education position at 50%
 - c. Create a coordinator of special education position (either part-time or full-time) to provide administrative coverage at a lower cost than the previous administrative position.

Appendices

Appendix A - Study Agreement

FCMAT

FISCAL CRISIS & MANAGEMENT
ASSISTANCE TEAM

CSIS California School Information Services

FISCAL CRISIS & MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM STUDY AGREEMENT January 7, 2011

The FISCAL CRISIS AND MANAGEMENT ASSISTANCE TEAM (FCMAT), hereinafter referred to as the Team, and the Atwater Elementary 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 Atwater Elementary 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.

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. The final report will be published on the FCMAT website.

2. SCOPE OF THE WORK

A. Scope and Objectives of the Study

The scope and objectives of this study are to:

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the special education delivery system and determine how the program can be more cost efficient. The review will include recommendations to reduce the level of contributions from the unrestricted general fund while sustaining the quality of services and meeting the legal requirements of the program.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of the staffing process for certificated staff and classroom aides including class size ratios and provide recommendations, if needed.

3. Review the district's implementation of the Response to Intervention Model (RTI) and provide recommendations, if any.
4. Review District Student Study team process and make recommendations to improve efficiency.
5. Review the Criteria for Speech Identification and exit criteria and make recommendations if needed.
6. Review speech caseloads and RSP caseloads and make recommendations if needed.
7. Review Special Education administration (district level position). Review district of similar size and determine whether it is typical to have a Director of Special Education position (or something similar) specifically restricted to special education or an administrative position that manages other areas of operation in addition to special education. Make recommendations to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

B. Services and Products to be Provided

- 1) Orientation Meeting - The Team will conduct an orientation session at the School District to brief District management and supervisory personnel on the procedures of the Team and on the purpose and schedule of the study.
- 2) On-site Review - The Team will conduct an on-site review at the District office and at school sites if necessary.
- 3) Exit Report - 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 - 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 administration 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 cost. 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, CFE, Deputy Executive Officer, Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, Kern County Superintendent of Schools Office. The study team may also include:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>A. William Gillaspie</i> | <i>FCMAT Chief Management Analyst</i> |
| <i>B. JoAnn Murphy</i> | <i>FCMAT Consultant</i> |
| <i>C. Anne Stone</i> | <i>FCMAT Consultant</i> |

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. 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.

Based on the elements noted in section 2 A, the total cost of the study is estimated at \$12,300.

- 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 or proposed organizational charts
 - 4) Current and two (2) prior years' audit reports
 - 5) Any documents requested on a supplemental listing
 - 6) Any documents requested on the supplemental listing should be provided to FCMAT in electronic format when possible.
 - 7) Documents that are only available in hard copy should be scanned by the district and sent to FCMAT in an electronic format.
 - 8) All documents should be provided in advance of field work and any delay in the receipt of the requested documentation may affect the start date of the project.
- 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 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:

Orientation:	<i>March 2011 , specific dates to be determined</i>
Staff Interviews:	<i>to be determined</i>
Exit Interviews:	<i>to be determined</i>
Preliminary Report Submitted:	<i>to be determined</i>
Final Report Submitted:	<i>to be determined</i>
Board Presentation:	<i>to be determined</i>
Follow-Up Support:	<i>If requested</i>

7. CONTACT PERSONName of contact person: Martin FregosoTelephone: (209) 357-6100 x306 FAX: (209) 357-6163E-Mail: mfregoso@aesd.edu

 2-11-2011
Melinda Hennes, Superintendent
Atwater Elementary School District
Date

 January 7, 2011
Anthony L. Bridges, CFE
Deputy Executive Officer
Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team
Date