ARRA LAUSD Charter Schools
Special Education Needs Assessment
Report of Findings

Executive Summary

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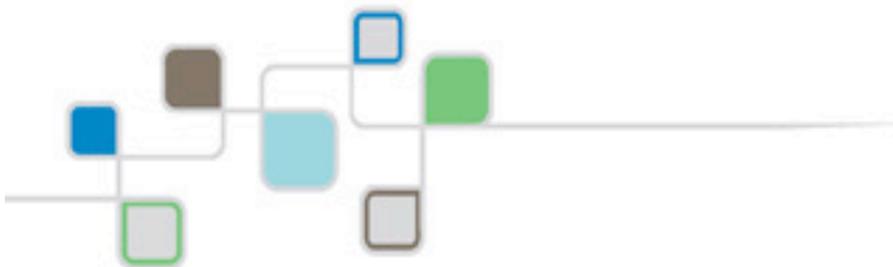
CROSS & JOFTUS

Introduction

This is the Executive Summary of the *ARRA LAUSD Charter School Special Education Needs Assessment Report of Findings* delivered on April 28, 2011[1]. The report is concerned primarily with the delivery of education by public charter schools for students with disabilities. In the fall of 2010, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) commissioned a needs assessment of special education in the city's public charter schools. Cross & Joftus conducted the study during winter and spring of 2011. It examines how charter schools bring leadership, commitment, and innovation to deliver academic success for students with disabilities. It looks at the varied ways they seek and use resources available through the region's Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) infrastructure. Finally, it offers perspectives on how the public charters perceive the advantages of the new LAUSD SELPA focused on charter schools.

This report reveals mostly good news about how students with special needs are being served in LA's charter schools. Indeed, there are several models of excellence noted in the report, where all children, including children with disabilities, appear to be learning successfully. But, like the charter schools themselves, our analysis also indicates that practices vary considerably. Strengths and challenges are delineated in each section to assist with eventual professional development design. These themes are categorized broadly in the areas of: 1) Leadership, Culture and Systems; 2) Teaching and Learning; 3) Support and Resources for Learning Communities.

Support Services and A New SELPA Structure

As part of their authorization requirements, charter schools are held accountable for the achievement of all students in the same ways as are traditional schools of the district. They must follow a strict set of reporting guidelines for all students with disabilities, utilizing specific data systems such as Welligent (for tracking online (Individual Education Plans [IEPs] and other related services) and Integrated Student

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[1] To download the full report, go to:
http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,1112439&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP or
www.calcharters.org

Information System (ISIS). They must also complete a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the district, "regarding the provision and funding of special education services consistent with the requirements of the LAUSD SELPA Local Plan for Special Education."[2]

Charter school teams interviewed for this study indicated that they contract out for various services to support learning for students with disabilities. They also described their experiences accessing state and federal funding. Since the California Charter Schools Act in 1992, there have been two options afforded to charter schools for special education services. The first enables a school to operate as a "school of the district," letting the district keep all of the state and federal funding for special education and provide all of the services. The second is to operate as a local education agency (LEA) for purposes of special education, by joining a SELPA in order to access state and federal special education funding. Some of the LA public charters have chosen not to join the LAUSD SELPA and have selected others in the region, including the ElDorado SELPA and the Southwest SELPA. Other options for SELPA membership are also available, including the Los Angeles County Office of Education's SELPA, Lodi Area SELPA Region (LASER), Mountain Desert, and soon to be others.

The district SELPA retains between 27% and 40% of special education funding.[3] This arrangement proves challenging for the charters. As a result, charter school representatives are working with LAUSD and CCSA (California Charter Schools Association) to define a new structure which would create one overarching Administrative Unit with two SELPAs: one designed specifically for charter schools, and the other for LAUSD schools—administered by its own director and governed by the existing Board of Education.

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[2]See Los Angeles Unified School District, Policy for Charter School Authorizing, January 12, 2010 (accessed electronically March 28, 2011 at
http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,1112433&_dad=ptl&_schema=PTL_EP).
[3]"A Plan for SELPA Reorganization: Innovative Options for Charter Schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District" distributed by CCSA, February 2011.

While a rough outline of oversight, representation, process, and funding had been sketched out at the time of our interviews, many of the details had yet to be defined as to how funds would be allocated, what services would be provided, and who would be hired to administer the SELPA. While this was causing some nervousness among charter leaders, collaboration efforts have continued on a positive course and the SELPA Charter Director position has been posted.

Students With Disabilities (SWDs) in LAUSD

Of the 612,443 (K-12) students with IEPs in the state of California, 77,135 (12.5%) attend regular LAUSD schools. Another 4,686 attend the 121 charter schools currently part of the larger LAUSD SELPA. This group of schools will be referred to as the "study pool." The remaining LAUSD charter schools not in the study pool are those that have chosen to belong to another SELPA.

In some of the schools we visited, 12% or more of their students were labeled as having disabilities. In other schools, however, the percentage was lower. Overall, less than 10% of the students in the study pool have IEPs, compared to 12.4% in LAUSD and 11% in California. Of those students with IEPs, the majority (63.3%) are classified as having a Specific Learning Disability (SLD). Students with specific learning disabilities also comprise the majority of students with disabilities in the LAUSD and state populations.

Methodology

The needs assessment process was designed to gather data from a variety of important perspectives to answer two overarching questions: "How well are students with special needs being served in LAUSD charter schools, and what supports and services do charter schools need to provide the highest-quality services to these students?"

The Cross & Joftus study targeted a sample of charter schools that represent a diverse cross-section (size, region, grade levels, Academic Progress Indicator (API)

scores, Socio-economic Status (SES), and IEP percentage) of the 121 schools in the LAUSD SELPA study pool. We engaged with 31 schools (25.6%) in a variety of ways, some by conducting site visits and classroom observations, others by touring campuses and interviewing staff, and some by facilitating focus group conversations. Many of these schools are part of larger CMOs and therefore represent a broader set of principles and organizational approaches than the stand-alone schools from which we drew data. By targeting some of these larger CMOs, our outreach, by association, was broader than the 31 schools listed in the report. Research teams also interviewed leaders from the CCSA, as well as the LAUSD Special Education Division. And, we dove deeply into the databases used to collect and manage student IEP data.

A survey was distributed to charter leadership and staff that was designed to probe staff levels of knowledge and opinions about the services and support being provided for students with special needs, and the professional development and tools staff members think they need to do their jobs better. We received 600 responses.

A guiding principle of our work is that it should be designed and carried out in partnership with key charter school stakeholders from the district, CCSA, the JPA (the Joint Powers Authority, a consortium of more than 65 charter school groups in LAUSD), and parents. A Stakeholder Advisory Group was formed in order to help us accomplish this goal. The stakeholders will be responsible for continued guidance as we finalize the recommendations and action plans outlined in this report.

Findings

A number of themes emerged as researchers met with educators and stakeholders, observed classrooms, interviewed parents and students, and read survey responses. These themes are generalized across the diversity of sites and conversations as described in the previous section. Strengths and challenges are delineated in each section to assist with eventual professional development design. These themes can be categorized broadly in the areas of: 1) Leadership, Culture and Systems; 2) Teaching and Learning; 3) Support and Resources for Learning

Communities. Finally, we examine and share our findings regarding data management and systems for charter schools.

Leadership, Culture and Systems

During our visits, we were introduced to many strong leaders, doing extraordinary things under often difficult conditions. Our conversations with these leaders revealed the complexities of their jobs, particularly when it comes to serving SWDs in their environments. While several of the school and Charter Management Organization (CMO) leaders with whom we spoke were able to articulate a clear vision and strategy for serving the needs of SWDs in their schools and were intelligently and efficiently focusing their resources, many were still struggling with implementation and acquisition of services, professional development for their special educators, and timely distribution of data to make decisions. These challenges were attributed to communication challenges with LAUSD, leadership turnover, and small school size or funding.

Findings in the areas of Leadership, Culture, and Systems suggest the need for:

1. Improved communication systems and collaboration for the provision of services for SWDs between charters and LAUSD.

2. Improved communications between Charters, staff, and LAUSD regarding placement procedures and options.

3. Improved training and support to enable more schools to handle moderately to severely disabled students.

4. Continued collaboration efforts in the planning for the new SELPA.

5. Strengthening of organizational leadership skills for communicating vision and values related to special education.

6. Access to networks and help with community outreach and fundraising strategies for charter leaders who have more limited resources and community support.

7. Strengthening the knowledge base of Charter leaders on research-based service delivery and Response to Intervention (RtI) options.

Some Places to See

> - **For Leadership in Vision and Communication for Special Education:** Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) Schools
> - **For Leadership in Creating Resources and Partnerships for Serving Moderate to Severely Disabled Students:** Camino Nuevo, PUC, CHIME, Bert Corona, and Granada Hills.
> - **For Leadership in Parent and Community Partnerships:** Montague Charter Academy, Vaughn Next Century Learning Center, Fenton Avenue Charter Schools, CHIME, James Jordan, and ICEF (Inner City Education Foundation) schools.
> - **For Leadership in Communication of Behavior Expectations:** Synergy Schools

Teaching and Learning

Several teaching and learning themes arose as visiting teams observed general education classroom teachers implementing accommodations for students with special needs, as well as paraprofessionals and resource teachers (RSPs) working with students. Teams visited resource rooms, learning centers, SDCs (special day classes), small pullout groups, and speech therapy sessions. They also spoke with RSPs informally about their work and to clarify interventions, IEP use, and supports and tools in place that might not be evident. Findings include many strengths in the areas of explicit, standards-based instruction in general education classrooms where SWDs were present. Differentiation of instruction, teaching to diverse learning modalities, and stretching students to higher levels of thinking, however, were challenge areas in many schools.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

An analysis of California Special Education Management Information System (CASEMIS) data provided by the district reveals that 85% of students with IEPs in the charter school study pool are spending, on average, 80% or more of their school day in the general education classroom. Only 60% of students with IEPs in LAUSD traditional schools spend this much time in general education classrooms. This means that charter

schools in our study are doing a better job of offering a less restrictive environment to their students with special needs than their district peers. It also means, however, that the skills and knowledge of general education teachers must be all the more current and nimble, and the collaboration with special education teachers all the more seamless. It also means that, if schools are to begin to serve more students with moderate to severe disabilities, we need to prepare them accordingly if we wish to maintain quality inclusive programs. We observed some highly skilled teachers at all of the schools that we visited. The challenge for all schools, however, remains in the systematic training, reinforcement of skills, and collaborations that are required to offer a high-quality full inclusion model.

High-Impact, Research-Based Teaching Practices

Visiting teams observed many high-impact teaching and learning practices—including non-linguistic representations and advanced organizers, writing in the content areas, and providing feedback. Also notable was the clear focus across the sample of standards-based lessons and teaching practice aligned to the standards. While this is a clear area of strength for most of the schools observed, there was also evidence of a lack of use of other high-impact teaching and learning strategies—including vocabulary instruction, building background knowledge, critical thinking, differentiated instruction, higher order thinking, and use of assessment to plan instruction—which need to be addressed.

Response to Intervention (RtI)

While the percentage of time that the typical student with disabilities spends in the general education setting noted above might indicate that an inclusion model was utilized in most schools, our observations and focus group conversations revealed that this was not necessarily an explicit RtI strategy. There are some strong RtI models being implemented, yet in too many schools, there seemed to be a lack of any kind of coherent plan for monitoring the progress of students with disabilities and providing targeted supports within the RtI framework. This does not mean that students with disabilities were not being supported, but simply that they were being supported without

the foundation of a coherent RtI or articulated systems change models of school-wide tiered interventions.

Speech and Language Services

Our observations and conversations revealed that many schools contract for speech and language services with outside agencies. These services utilize a pull-out model for the sessions that are typically 30 minutes long. This approach has both benefits and drawbacks. The benefit of contracting out is that students usually receive reliable service. The downside is that because it is a contract agency the school does not have the ability to implement a cutting-edge special education model with innovative service delivery that includes speech and language personnel (SLP). In addition, a critical disconnect occurs between the service being provided and the general education classroom, and collaboration is minimal. SLPs have a tremendous amount to offer general education teachers in terms of teaching strategies in the areas of vocabulary instruction and language development, if given the opportunity, such as strengthening the skills of general educators and special educators in differentiated instruction and teaching to different learning modalities.

Findings for Teaching and Learning suggest the need for:

1. Strengthening skills of general educators and special educators in differentiated instruction and teaching to different learning modalities.

2. Strengthening skills of general educators and special educators in how to create rigorous lessons.

3. Seeking ways to include Speech and Language services in-house or, if contracted out, to more closely align those services to best practices for school personnel as defined by ASHA/CSHA[4], including classroom-based assessment, curriculum-relevant intervention strategies, social-pragmatic language support, and single-sound intervention models.

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[4] American Speech Language and Hearing Association/CA Speech Language and Hearing Association

4. Utilizing technology for purposes of universal design, instructional technology and assistive technology.

5. Implementing more intentional, strategic, full-inclusion models with support from personnel trained in such models, SWPBS, instruction for students identified with autism or emotional disabilities, and rigorous instructional strategies.

Some Places to See

> • **For the Teaching of Higher-order Thinking Skills and Rigorous Lessons for all Students and Exemplary Inclusion Models:** PUC, Granada Hills
> • **For Teacher-developed Materials to Help Students Access the Core Curriculum:** CHIME

Support and Resources for Learning Communities

In order to deliver high-quality instruction, teachers must have access to high-quality, evidence-based resources, training and tools, and the time and space to continuously learn and improve. While visiting campuses and speaking with leaders, we tried to gain an understanding of what types of learning communities were in place and what was available to teachers in each setting. For special education teachers, we found most commonly a sense of isolation from the larger teaching staff of the school. Often they were attending professional development sessions alone, and some were unable to communicate consistently with their partner teachers even when placed directly in "co-teaching" configurations. Paraprofessionals were even more isolated and often not receiving the training needed to keep current with student needs. In addition, we found access and utilization of timely student achievement data (including IEPs) to be lacking in many sites, and an inconsistent availability or absence of assistive or other technologies to enhance learning opportunities.

Findings for Support and Resources for Learning Communities suggest the need for:

1. Breaking down isolation between special educators and general educators.

2. Breaking down isolation between the charters themselves and between charters and the district.

3. Strengthening skills and systems for consistent, deep-level, data-driven practice.

4. Strengthening skills and systems to provide high-quality Co-Teaching and Collaboration between special education and general education staff.

5. Providing access and training in use of assistive and other technologies.

Some Places to See

- **For Strong Examples of Co-teaching and Collaboration**: James Jordan, CHIME, Vaughn, PUC schools, and Granada Hills.

- **For Strong Examples of Data-driven Practices**: Granada Hills Charter High School, PUC schools, Vaughn, Camino Nuevo, Bert Corona, James Jordan, and Green Dot Schools.

- **For Strong Examples of Technology Integration for Special Ed:** CHIME, Birmingham (iPads), Vaughn (READ 180 labs), Fenton (using FM Systems in classrooms for all students), Bert Corona (using Khan Academy), and Camino Nuevo. Additionally, James Jordan Middle School has secured refurbished computers for all 6th grade students to utilize at home, pre-loaded with educational software.

Data Management and Systems Findings

LAUSD uses Welligent software to manage information on students with IEPs, and the charters are required to use this software as well. Our data experts had numerous conversations with both charter users and LAUSD administrators in an attempt to better understand the strengths and challenges associated with data management for charter schools. Our conversations with district officials and charter leaders revealed a number of resources and systems already in place to serve schools

in their data management. Each of these resources and systems represents both assets and challenges for charters.

Findings for Data Management and Systems suggest the need for:

1. Strengthening communications about available training and resources for Welligent system.

2. Streamlining data entry procedures and create greater efficiencies.

3. Creating networks of users for trouble-shooting and support.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are designed to assist LA charter schools in focusing their efforts and resources in some very basic but innovative ways. Fundamentally, we are suggesting a professional development agenda to both support improvement and implementation efforts already underway as well as to begin new learning. More significant, perhaps, is our recommendation that this learning take place not in traditional ways but within the types of communities and collaborations with other charters, their communities, and the district that will nurture and deepen the learning. These communities and collaborations will also serve to spread best practices and leverage resources to provide the efficiencies of scale that often elude smaller charter organizations or schools. Finally, we offer some steps for addressing the issues raised in the report regarding the new SELPA structure.

While these recommendations are multi-faceted, it is helpful to incorporate them into the following three categories and further describe them in a table of detailed needs and recommendations:

1) **A Network of Communities of Practice (CoPs) and Professional Development (PD)** for continuous learning cycles. The CoP focus will be to enhance and support cross Charter and District communication and PD,

implement strategies and networks of support for both general and special educators, and propose an ongoing network to ensure quality services for students with disabilities within Charter Schools.

A network and accompanying PD will focus directly on service provision for students with disabilities across schools, general and special educators, and challenging exceptionalities (Autism, Emotional Disability, etc.). The network will be launched with a **Special Education Summit in August of 2011,** and could continue with periodic or monthly PD opportunities throughout the next school year.

2) **SELPA Strategic Planning and Supports** for the effective integration of the issues and data revealed in this needs assessment into the plans for the new Charter SELPA. This work will be in service of the already completed work by LAUSD, Charter Leaders and CCSA with a facilitated session or sessions beginning in June of 2011.

3) **Welligent and Data Management Assistance** for improved use and integration of reporting requirements for charters. This work will be launched by creating a CoP for Welligent users and producing a users guide for end users before September 1, 2011.

The following table summarizes the needs assessed and actions recommended in the full report.

Issue/Theme	Need	Recommended for Immediate Action[6]
Leadership, Culture and Systems	1. Strengthen communication systems and collaboration for the provision of services for	a) Stakeholder group will work with the district to address issues raised in this needs assessment, beginning with joint

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[6] Immediate action items to be initiated or completed by August 30, 2011, utilizing ARRA funds.

| Leadership, Culture and Systems (cont'd) | SWDs between Charters and LAUSD

2. Strengthen communications regarding placement procedures.

3. Equip, train and support more schools to handle moderately to severely disabled students, including thru both use of instructional materials and instructional design.

4. Continue collaboration efforts in the planning for the new SELPA.

5. Strengthen organizational leadership skills for communicating vision and values related to special education.

6. Provide charter leaders who have more limited outside resources and community support access to networks and help with outreach strategies.

7. Strengthen knowledge base of Charter leaders on research-based service delivery and RtI options. | working groups.

b) Stakeholder group will define personnel and instructional support, including technology and instructional materials, to be secured in May/June (i.e. program specialists/coaches in areas of behavior/social skills, autism, ED, collaborative models, differentiation, etc.)

c) Design and develop resources to support collaborative, inclusive education models, including support documents to be utilized across Charter schools.

d) Offer a facilitated session with LAUSD, JPA, CCSA, El Dorado SELPA, and ARRA Stakeholders recommended for June, including stakeholders.

e) Education Summit to be held in August to be developed collaboratively with consultants, LAUSD, CCSA, JPA and stakeholders will include:

  I. Administrators strand focusing on leadership issues such as vision management
  II. Opportunities for affinity groups to gather and discuss ways to help each other, as well as allowing for some charters to showcase their programs
  III. Training on RtI models
  IV. Technology training
  V. Data Management strand |
| **Issue/Theme** | **Need** | **Recommended for Immediate** |

		Action
Teaching and Learning	1. Strengthen skills of general educators and special educators in differentiated instruction and teaching to different learning modalities. 2. Strengthen skills of general educators and special educators in how to create rigorous lessons. 3. Seek ways to include Speech and Language services in-house or if contracted out to more closely align those services to best practices for school personnel as defined by ASHA/CSHA, including classroom-based assessment, curriculum-relevant intervention strategies, social-pragmatic language support, and single-sound intervention models. 4. Strengthen skills of general educators, special educators, and administrators in how to deal with severe emotional/behavior issues. 5. Implement more intentional, strategic, full-inclusion models	a) 12 Coaches to be hired to work on site with schools on all strategies designated as areas of need in this report. b) Coaches will provide job-embedded support on data-driven practice and co-teaching. c) Training on differentiated instruction, teaching to different learning modalities, and creating rigorous lessons. d) Training and follow up to already provided district training on CPI. e) Training and support for best practice for SLPs to support success of SWDs in the general classroom. f) Training and support on implementation of intentional, strategic, full-inclusion models. g) Summit will include strand on RtI research-based models, including showcases from exemplary charter schools
Issue/Theme	**Need**	**Recommended for Immediate Action**

Support and Resources for Learning Communities	1. Break down isolation between special educators and general educators.	a) Coaches will provide job-embedded support on data driven practice and co-teaching.
	2. Break down isolation between the charters themselves and between charters and the district.	b) Schools will be given free accounts to online resource repository and networking site called Brokers of Expertise (www.myboe.org).
	3. Strengthen skills and systems to provide high-quality Co-Teaching and Collaboration between special ed. and general ed. Staff.	c) Schools will receive training from Infinitec on UDL, instructional and assistive technologies.
	4. Strengthen skills and systems for consistent, deep-level, data-driven practice.	d) Technological resources will be provided to schools/teachers through technological grants and training under the direction of the Stakeholder group.
	5. Provide access and training in use of assistive and other technologies.	e) Summit will begin the process of seeding communities of practice by bringing teams from schools into a learning environment together and connecting them with other teams from other schools.
		f) Summit is being created collaboratively by stakeholder group which includes members from LAUSD and charters.
		g) Summit will include session on co-teaching and collaboration models along with showcases from exemplary charter schools.
		h) Summit will include sessions on data-driven practice along with showcases from exemplary charter schools.
Issue/Theme	**Need**	**Recommended for Immediate**

		Action
Data Management and Systems	1. Strengthen communications about available training and resources for Welligent system. 2. Streamline data entry procedures and create greater efficiencies. 3. Create networks of users for trouble-shooting and support.	a) Consultants will work with district on developing a users guide and other resources to help with integration and interface issues. b) Summit will include a Welligent strand where district training can occur. c) Future district trainings will seek out charter campuses as hosts. d) User groups will form on BOE to discuss and trouble shoot data issues. e) Re-integrate charters into SIS if they want this option.

Conclusion

We would like to thank all those schools and organizations who opened their doors, their classrooms, and their filing cabinets to us; who sat down and talked with us when they had so many other things to do, and who were honest about their sources of pride as well as their frustration. Throughout this report, we have identified schools and organizations in which we saw particularly strong examples of practice in action, or in some cases, we named names simply to illustrate a point more clearly. This was done with the support of our stakeholder group and with the hope that we might begin to make some of the most exciting practices more visible across the LA charter landscape. This is not to say that those schools and organizations singled out do not have work to do in some areas and do not face challenges. This is also not to say that those not mentioned here by name are not good schools with dedicated staff. Indeed, the good news of this report is that the LAUSD charter schools we visited and the leaders we spoke with are all capable and eager participants in the journey. We have tried to accurately articulate their needs and challenges as we heard and saw them, in the hope that the new SELPA can begin a new chapter for this important work.