SUMMARY

The Shasta Union High School District (SUHSD) Special Education Department’s Adult Transition Program provides services for a maximum of four years to students with significant disabilities who are between the ages of 18 and 22. The students in the program have a wide variety of physical and intellectual developmental disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy. The Adult Transition Program is designed to develop the students’ life skills and experiences necessary for their everyday living.

After a series of parental complaints to the SUHSD Board of Trustees, several of the parents/guardians expressed frustration at the response received, and submitted written complaints to the Grand Jury. The Grand Jury focused on the following areas:

• communication in general between parents/guardians and the district;

• confusion as to whether the Special Education student would obtain a Diploma or a Certificate of Completion (students who have obtained a Diploma are ineligible for the Adult Transition Program);

• staff to student ratio;

• termination of the fund-raising recycling program;

• parent club funding issues.

The Grand Jury determined through our investigation that, although there are a number of parents of Adult Transition students who have complaints regarding the program, it does meet the needs of the target population.

BACKGROUND

In 2006-2007 SUHSD administration withdrew the district’s students from the Adult Transition Program operated by Shasta County Office of Education (SCOE) and moved the program to an SUHSD site. They determined that a district-administered program would be more cost effective and better serve the needs of district students. Since that time, many parents have expressed dissatisfaction with the program. Parents of both current and past Adult Transition students have complained about:
• lack of communication between district staff and parents/guardians;
• confusion over the consequences of the Diploma versus the Certificate of Completion pathway (often referred to as a “track”) decision;
• transportation issues;
• destruction of classroom materials;
• discontinuation of the fund-raising recycling program;
• staff to student ratio;
• relocation of the program from Shasta College;
• confiscation of parent club funds.

**APPROACH**

The Grand Jury:

• interviewed nine parents of current and past Adult Transition Program students;
• interviewed one parent of a student entering the Adult Transition Program;
• interviewed four SUHSD administrators;
• interviewed Shasta County Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) staff;
• interviewed a SCOE administrator;
• interviewed Adult Transition Program teachers;
• toured the Adult Transition Program classrooms at Enterprise High School;
• toured Far Northern Regional Center;
• attended two SUHSD Board Meetings;
• reviewed the Special Education Department pamphlet *Continuum of Services*
• reviewed the *Notice of Procedural Safeguards and Parents’ Rights* under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,* (IDEA) *Part B*
• reviewed a draft document titled *Course of Study Decisions.*
DISCUSSION

Numerous complaints were expressed by parents/guardians regarding a lack of communication between them, and the staff and administrators of SUHSD. Among the complaints were:

- a lack of a forum to discuss everyday issues;
- a failure to provide a timely and clear explanation about education pathway choices;
- an inadequate explanation of why students were moved from one school site to another;
- an inadequate explanation of the change in transportation policies.

This lack of communication led to misunderstandings and mistrust by parents/guardians.

As early as elementary school, a child may be identified as a special education student. Once this occurs, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is proposed for the student. The IEP process team may include the parents/guardians, school psychologist, counselor, social worker, the student’s teachers, a school administrator, and any therapists identified in the plan. The IEP is a legally binding document that spells out exactly what special education services and/or therapies a child will receive and why. It is tailored to the child’s needs. Provisions for modifications, accommodations, and other special services are included in the plan created for the student by the IEP team. The team meets at least once a year to review the student’s progress and the continued appropriateness of the plan. Any IEP team member, including a parent/guardian, may call for an IEP meeting at any time.

There are two pathways a high school student in special education can take; one is the Diploma pathway, and the other is the Certificate of Completion pathway. The Diploma pathway leads to a traditional high school diploma (earned through a modified program). The Diploma awarded at graduation ends the student’s free public education entitlement under the Federal IDEA. By comparison, the Certificate of Completion pathway allows a student to be eligible for additional free public education, including the Adult Transition Program, and other services for up to four years or to the age of 22.

Numerous parents complained, and some administrators agreed, that the differences between and consequences relating to these two pathways have been inadequately explained. When parents/guardians were informed there was a possibility for their child to obtain a diploma, many wanted to pursue that opportunity. However, they said they were not adequately informed that by accepting a diploma their child would be precluded from participating in the Adult Transition Program. In order to earn the required 230 credits to graduate, the student must be on the Diploma path throughout most of high school. If a
A Special Education student has until age 22 to earn these essential credits.

In the fall of 2012, SUHSD and SELPA informed us that they were working on a document to more clearly outline the consequences of the pathway choice. In May 2013, SUHSD provided us with a draft copy of *Course of Study Decisions, “Decision: High School Diploma or Certificate of Completion.”* This new draft document, provided by SUHSD, more clearly defines the differences in the choice between the two pathways and states that the conversation should be started by the end of eighth grade.

Two years ago, the program had exclusive use of two vans for transporting students to activities in the community. These activities included classes at Shasta College and life skills training such as shopping trips, work opportunities, and recycling. Citing safety concerns the district eliminated both vans from the program last year. Without the vans, the students were transported by bus. After dropping the students off at their destination, the bus then returned to the garage. The parents/guardians expressed concerns about the bus not being immediately available, as the vans had been, in case of an emergency. In response to these concerns one teacher-driven van has recently been returned to service.

Another complaint expressed by the parents was that an administrator had cleared out a retiring teacher’s classroom of items they believed still useful to the students. Small appliances, work books, text books, bookcases and other articles were thrown into the dumpster. Subsequently some parents recovered these articles, and an apology was made by the administrator.

A further complaint concerned use of money raised by students. A “Parents’ Club” had been in operation in order to raise money for non-school activities such as class trips, and special events. Money was raised by recycling and bake-sales. Eventually however, there were no parents involved with the club, leaving only a staff member responsible for the funds. As this was against district policy, fundraising was halted, and the district demanded that the unauthorized account be closed. The money was re-deposited with the district into a separate account. The district requested that an Associated Student Body (ASB) account be established in order for fundraising to resume. After a few months, during which no ASB account had been opened, the district put the money into the classroom incidental account. Later, after those funds were spent for the classroom, an appropriate ASB account was established and fundraising activities resumed.

Currently, there is one certificated teacher and ten support staff for the 19 students in the Adult Transition Program (classroom aides, including a one-on-one aide, therapist, and nurse). In the past there have been as many as 38 students with three teachers and additional support staff. The staffing ratio is dependent upon enrollment as well as the severity of disability and the overall class makeup. Generally, enrollment in local schools has declined in recent years. In addition, Anderson Union High School District and Gateway Unified School District each started their own Adult Transition Program and reclaimed their students. This resulted in significantly less enrollment in SUHSD’s Adult
Transition Program.

The Grand Jury received numerous complaints about the Adult Transition Program no longer being located on the Shasta College campus. The parents/guardians felt that it had been advantageous for the Adult Transition Program students to be among students their own age. SCOE had provided classroom space at Shasta College for the Adult Transition Program. When SUHSD elected to operate and administer its own Adult Transition Program, SCOE offered to rent the classroom space to the district. SUHSD declined because they had district classrooms available. Currently, the classrooms are at Enterprise High School.

FINDINGS

F1. There has been a lack of communication between SUHSD’s Special Education Department and the parents/guardians of special needs high school students regarding graduation options (Diploma vs. Certificate of Completion pathways).

F2. There is no adequate forum for groups of parents/guardians to communicate with the special education staff on a regular and ongoing basis.

F3. The Adult Transition Program Parents’ Club funds were not managed according to district policy; however, this has since been rectified.

F4. The SUHSD Board of Trustees was responsive to several of the parents’ concerns, for example reinstating the use of a van and resuming recycling.

F5. Based on the ratio of staff to students of 1:2, the SUHSD Adult Transition Program is staffed appropriately when compared to other local school districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The Grand Jury recommends that by September 1, 2013 the SUHSD Board of Trustees finalize the Course of Study Decisions document. It should contain a clear explanation of the outcomes of choosing the educational pathway leading to a diploma versus the pathway leading to a certificate of completion. The district should provide it to parents/guardians in a timely fashion.

R2. The Grand Jury recommends that SUHSD schedule regular meetings between parents/guardians and the special education staff to address and discuss general concerns beginning at the start of the next semester.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires that:

- The SUHSD Board of Trustees shall respond to F1 and R1.
REQUESTED RESPONSES

The Grand Jury requests that

- The Director of Special Education, SUHSD, respond to F1, F2, and R1, R2.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

DISCLAIMER – This report was issued by the Grand Jury with the exception of two members who were recused due to a potential conflict of interest. These jurors were not present for any of the interviews and were excluded from all parts of the investigation, including deliberations and the making and acceptance of this report.