

Statewide Special Education Update June 2022

Adam Ibrahim

Hi, and welcome to the California Teachers Association Instruction and Professional Development podcast. I'm Adam Ibrahim and today we are talking about the latest updates in special education.

The purpose of this podcast is to update CTA members and staff on the latest hot topics and updates. We want to talk with you today about five things you need to know about special education right now.

With me today is Karen Taylor, the lead staff for special education and mental health for the CTA IPD Department. Welcome, Karen. What's been going on around the state with special ed?

Karen Taylor

Hi, Adam. I'm excited to talk to you today about that. It's been really busy — on top of everything with the pandemic.

But a few years ago, with the budget, we actually got some work groups put into place where CTA members were able to be involved in some decision-making on some big, hot topics around special education.

Those work groups were an alternative pathway to a diploma for our students who don't normally receive a high school diploma. The second work group was one on IEP practices and looking at data around the state on how districts are implementing IEPs — what the processes look like, what the meetings look like.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the recommendations that came out of that and how they impact teachers. The last work group was a special education governance and accountability study that was done by West Ed. That has created a lot of talk about special education and has impacted this year's trailer bill — so, pretty exciting work being done in special education.

Adam Ibrahim

Why don't we start off with the IEP practices and recommendations?

Karen Taylor

Perfect. So, let's talk about that. Out of the IEP work group came a recommendation for the state to have one statewide IEP template.

Because right now, if I am a teacher in say, Orange County, and my district may be using a certain software and I get a student that comes from Butte County, just as an example, they may have a completely different IEP template. It could be written completely different. If I'm a special ed teacher, that really puts an extra workload on me

when I'm having to do that transition meeting. Because now I'm having to translate what was done in one area of the state to our area.

So, what the work group said was that if we had a statewide IEP template, it would make it a lot easier for students who are mobile to move around the state and for all teachers to be able to really work off of the same template and kind of the same standards.

Everyone follows the same federal and statewide laws when it comes to IEPs. However, they do look different to follow up on. This year, nothing really happened around that work. But the hope is, and the plan is, that this next year we're going to have a work group that the CDE will be putting together, and by the end of the year they will have a plan for implementation and potentially a new statewide IEP template.

Adam Ibrahim

Do you see this template leading to any other sort of streamlining of work around the IEPs for teachers?

Karen Taylor

I think you have the workload piece, which is really important because special ed teachers work so many hours on IEPs, it's crazy. I was a special ed teacher — it's not even a joke that you know many of us have worked until 10 o'clock at night on these IEPs. This will help.

And then the other approach we're hoping that this helps with is working with families and improving that communication and improving the relationships. So, my hope is that this work group, in this next year, they will also look at some practices that maybe could be standardized to help districts work more collaboratively with parents.

I think that would alleviate the need for so many advocates and adversarial IEP meetings. And ultimately that's going to lower the stress on our special education teachers.

Adam Ibrahim

That's fantastic — this sounds like really important work. It's a surprise that the state hasn't taken the steps to make this happen a lot sooner. I'm really glad you're going to be involved and CTA is going to continue to be involved. I can't wait to hear what the outcome is of this work group.

Would you like to shift now to talk a little bit about the special education government accountability workgroup and some of the conversations and discussions that it has generated?

Karen Taylor

Yes, that has generated a lot of hot conversations around funding on who is actually holding districts accountable for services for students.

If you follow the advisory commission meetings for special education, they've talked about this study quite a bit. I won't talk about the whole study because it was 140 pages. Some interesting things did come out of it. For example, when they looked at the research on student outcomes, they found that the size of the LEA and SELPA had no bearing on student outcomes. But what did have bearing on student outcomes was the length of time a teacher had been in the classroom. So, the more veteran a special education teacher, the more success a student with an IEP was likely to see.

I think districts really need to pay attention. And they need to do whatever it takes to pay their teachers more money. They need to retain their teachers and really look at how can we make our special education teachers happier by decreasing their workload, lowering their levels of stress. Because it's been proven that veteran teachers do improve those student outcomes more than new teachers.

The other piece was that the greater the percentage a student with an IEP was in general education for the most part — they looked at all the different identifying disabilities — but in general, the more a student was in general education, the higher outcomes they had. That means that the state's push for inclusion is the right thing to do. However, it really matters how we do that.

With that comes the funding piece. This was a governance and accountability study; there was also a finance study done but there wasn't a work group with that. West Ed's recommendations had a lot of recommendations around special ed funding, and the governor's team was obviously paying attention. They obviously read the study. In the Governor's omnibus trailer bill, they are recommending that LEAs get their correct apportionment of special education funds.

Normally, these funds go directly to the SELPA, which is a special education local plan area for those of you who don't know what that is. Then, the SELPAs each have their own formula for their district. Not to add a different layer of complexity here, but we have single district SELPAs in the state, so some districts are their own SELPAs. This means that they get the money directly and then they can bend it as they see fit.

Or we have multi-district SELPAs, which complicates things greatly, and usually these are in more rural areas. But this is where you have a lot of different districts, who are all working with the SELPA, get the money and then based on their own funding formula, they redistribute those funds. Those LEAs may not be getting their correct apportionments.

The recommendation this year is that LEAs will actually get the correct apportionment and then see how much working with the SELPAs is also costing them. This is not to get rid of SELPAs, but what this does do is create some transparency around funding. It certainly doesn't solve the problem. We all know that special education is not fully funded at the federal level. However, it is the step in the right direction.

Adam Ibrahim

Thank you. That's a lot of fantastic information. It sounds like it is a very busy issue area right now, and there are some positives in there. I think that first piece about validating the impact an experienced educator can have, and also raising the question of are our

districts truly accounting for the costs of losing veteran teachers as we face a sort of nationwide teacher shortage and the great resignation.

The second piece — I hope we could perhaps probe a little bit deeper on — is this notion of inclusion. While the state sort of takes its time to figure out the apportionment piece, if you are a teacher right now, who is working with students coming off of a pandemic and who is motivated by this validating data around inclusion having a positive outcome for students, what are some things that they could do now to build greater inclusiveness in their classrooms?

Karen Taylor

That is such a great question. I really think one thing teachers can do — especially general education teachers — is really think about what is ableism. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that term. Ableism refers to bias prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities and it hinges on the idea that people with disabilities are less valuable than non-disabled people.

Unfortunately, we do see this in the general education classroom where general education teachers either don't challenge our students with IEPs — in terms of work — because they don't believe in their potential. Or they don't even spend as much time with them because they have an unconscious bias or maybe an explicit bias that a student with a disability is somehow less than a neurotypical student.

They can think of them as also general education students first. These are also kids, and they have an identified disability, so they also follow under the Americans with Disabilities Act. When we have them in our classroom — and this is just like the basics — are we following the accommodations and supports that this person with an identified disability needs to just reduce those barriers to learning?

If you think about it, the teacher has a lot of power in terms of reducing those barriers. If I were to give you some concrete examples, and I'm a general education teacher and I want to do more for my students with IEPs, I would look at using universal design for learning as an everyday standard in my practice.

UDL really takes a look at how students learn from a neuroscience perspective. If we can provide more options for students, including more options for challenge. If we can provide multiple means of representation for them; look at ways that we can insert teaching executive functioning skills in our classroom, I think those are all some really great places to start.

We do have a recorded webinar on universal design for learning on our CTA website — you can find that at www.cta.org/ipd.

From the special ed side: if you can talk with your general education teachers and be an advocate for your students — not in a confrontational way — but in just helping educate your colleagues on what it is your students may be going through. I just think our credentialing programs don't have a lot of actual training on universal design for learning and for understanding students with disabilities.

And I'm not saying that all credential programs don't have that — some do — but many of them don't have enough in the general ed programs. If special education educators could — and I'm not trying to put more work on them but just realizing that we can be part of the conversation to spark some movement in the general education classroom to help these students succeed. I hope that makes sense.

Adam Ibrahim

Absolutely. I hope you'll excuse me if I take a moment to plug the California Teachers Association in partnership with the National Education Association is offering micro-certifications. And within our micro-certifications, we have a stack of multiple special education micro-certifications, including one on universal designs for learning.

We'll link that along with the other resources mentioned beneath this podcast on the IPD webpage which is www.cta.org/ipd. The micro certifications are free for all CTA members.

Karen Taylor

Awesome. I have a plug too because CTA also has a special education conference. We'll have our third one on the last weekend of September. It will be from Sept. 30 through Oct. 2 in Burlingame.

We'll have over 60 electives for general education and special education educators.

Adam Ibrahim

That sounds like a great place to continue the conversation. Thank you very much again, Karen Taylor, lead staff for special education in the Instruction and Professional Development Department at CTA. Thank you so much.

Karen Taylor

Thank you for listening. This has been a production of the Instruction and Professional Development Department of the California Teachers Association. For more great content, visit our website at www.cta.org/ipd.