

Protect special education students from budget cuts

Sacramento City Unified School District must do better by special education students

BY JOSEPH BARRY

About a year ago, the Sacramento City Unified School District came under scrutiny for vast shortcomings in its special education program, mainly for African-American students and English learners.

A 2017 audit by The Council of the Great City Schools found that African-American students were nearly four times more likely to be given an out-of-school suspension, and that English learners were receiving only about half of the required special education services. The audit also concluded that both African-American students and English learners were being diagnosed to need special education services at a far higher rate than other students, and that the district's rate for separating students with disabilities was higher than both state and national averages.

In response, the district and its new Superintendent Jorge Aguilar made public claims that it was comprehensively adopting the council's recommendations and was committed to improving these shortcomings.

As a longtime advocate for persons with disabilities, these issues are what caused me to begin studying the district as part of my doctoral work at Sacramento State. By the summer of 2018, I had worked extensively to understand SCUSD's special education shortcomings.

Then news began to emerge about the extent of the district's budget deficit. In September, the Sacramento County Office of Education rejected SCUSD's budget for the first time and warned that \$28 million in cuts were needed. The district board talked about closing schools and laying off teachers.

I was devastated. How can the district afford to improve any outcomes in the face

of such a huge budget crisis? Nonetheless, I continued my work.

But after watching the district board meeting on December 13, I felt even more uneasy. SCUSD warned that it will go bankrupt in 2019 without cuts to employee health benefits.

But the Sacramento City Teachers Association is proposing cuts to administration instead. The district is in jeopardy of a state takeover.

I am a father of two SCUSD students, as well as an activist and a doctoral student. I feel the same unease as other parents about what budget cuts may mean for students. Unfortunately, I see a very unhealthy narrative developing that seems to pit teachers and unions against special education students.

Of the district's total enrollment of 40,617, there are 6,718 special education

students, according to SCUSD. It spends about \$121 million on special education services, including about \$84 million in local money.

When cuts must occur, no one wants to be immediately affected. However, the problem with such a battle for resources is that it exacerbates long-held prejudices that are unhealthy for students and society in general.

When I expressed my concerns to SCUSD administrators, they assured me that this narrative would not be tolerated. For the sake of Sacramento's history of diversity, I hope the superintendent and board members provide the leadership that is necessary. This crisis may create an opportunity to create a long-needed win for teachers and special education students alike.



Joseph Barry is a disability rights activist in Sacramento who ran for City Council in 2018.

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