

THE CALIFORNIA ADVISORY COMMISSION ON SPECIAL EDUCATION (ACSE)

2025–26 Annual Report



ACSE members with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond

From the Chair

Fifty years ago, Congress did something extraordinary. It passed the individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), declaring that every single child has the right to a free, appropriate public education.

IDEA didn't just open schoolhouse doors—it shifted power. IDEA gave children rights. It gave families a voice. It gave us a framework rooted in civil rights, not charity.

Over the past 50 years generations have refused to accept exclusion as inevitable. Today, more than 7.5 million students receive special education services nationwide. Children who once would have been institutionalized are now in classrooms, on playgrounds, in band concerts, at science fairs, walking and rolling across graduation stages. They are seen. They are thriving. And they are transforming their communities.

The question for the next 50 years is not whether students with disabilities belong. It is whether we will build systems bold enough to match their potential. So let's celebrate these 50 years. Let's honor the trailblazers, educators, families, and students. But let's remember that celebration is not the end. It is fuel for the future. ■



Sarah Notch
Chair

What is the ACSE?

The ACSE is an advisory body required by Federal (20 USC 1412 [a][21]) and State (EC 33590-6) statute. It provides recommendations and advice to the State Board of Education, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Legislature, and the Governor on new or continuing areas of research, program development and evaluation in California special education.

The ACSE holds a minimum of five meetings a year with additional subcommittee or task

force meetings as budget permits. Some members may also attend meetings of other organizations as liaisons. All ACSE meetings are open to the public pursuant to the Bagley-Keene Act.

Agendas are posted at least 10 days prior to the meeting date. Live video stream of ACSE meetings is available during times stated in the meeting agenda. A Webcast is posted within one week of the meeting provided that appropriate technology is

available at the meeting site.

The ACSE consists of members appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly, Senate Committee on Rules, Governor, and State Board of Education. ACSE members are parents, persons with disabilities, persons knowledgeable about the administration of special education, students, teachers, and legislative representatives from the Assembly and Senate. ■

Highlights of the Year

IDEA 50th Anniversary

On February 18, the ACSE joined the California Department of Education and partner organizations to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The celebration recognized five decades of ensuring students with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, Special Education Division Director Rachel Heenan, ACSE Chair Sarah Notch, and ACSE Commissioner Helena Donato-Sapp were among those who spoke to a packed room. Speakers reaffirmed their commitment to students with disabilities for the next 50 years, with Commissioner Donato-Sapp emphasizing the power of student voice in the ongoing conversation. As Gabriel Ryan, writer, presenter, and blogger for School Health Corporation, summed it up: “Access is not optional, and inclusion is not negotiable.”

Family Empowerment Centers (FECs)

FECs continued to make a measurable difference for families in California this year. Families who are overwhelmed and in need of support reach out to parent centers and leave prepared, confident, and equipped to advocate for their children. Relationships with LEAs are deepening, and referrals to FECs keep growing as districts and community-based organizations recognize the value these centers bring to their regions. At the same time, need has intensified. Families are navigating cuts to Medi-Cal and in-home supportive services, immigration fears,

housing instability, and support worker shortages, often all at once. FECs, in coordination with Seeds of Partnership and the broader statewide network of parent centers, have continued to expand and strengthen the infrastructure of family support in California, improving outcomes for students and experiences for families across our state. For more information on FECs, go to www.californiafamilyempowermentcenters.org

Inclusion

Education for all students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is required by laws such as IDEA. This year commissioners heard presentations from school administrators and educators about the success and challenges of implementing inclusion in their classrooms. A successful inclusion program is guided by formal policies and guidelines. Staff and administrations need to be educated and have a positive attitude. Classrooms need to have adequate staffing and education resources to ensure success. There must be opportunities to evaluate and make changes as needed.

Commissioners agree that when inclusion is successful all students can benefit academically and socially. Students grow to have more empathy and compassion for each other. The commission also recognizes that inclusion happens across a continuum and acknowledges the importance of self-contained classrooms for students who require more intensive levels of support as long as they are designed as spaces of belonging that honor each individual's rightful presence.

Student Commissioners

The ACSE was pleased to welcome its newest student commissioners, Michelle Feimer and Helena Donato-Sapp. Student commissioners serve as full voting members of the ACSE.



Helena Donato-Sapp

Commissioner Donato-Sapp already had experience with Robert's Rules of Order and the Brown Act through her service on the Long Beach Commission on Women and Girls—an appointment she received when she was 14 years old. Among other issues, she is specifically interested in understanding and confronting how private schools in the state of California are not held to the standards of IDEA.



Michelle Feimer

Commissioner Feimer's goal is to ensure every student with a disability feels heard and valued. As an ACSE member, she will work toward this goal by strengthening self-advocacy, encouraging student perspectives in decision-making, and improving access to resources that prepare students for success beyond K-12 schooling. ■

Stay connected! Find ACSE rosters, agendas, meeting webcasts and more at
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/acse.asp>

Summary of Meetings

ACSE meetings give invested partners an opportunity to inform commissioners about critical topics related to the education of students with disabilities. During the 2025–26 meeting year, the ACSE welcomed the following presentations:

- The California Early Learning and Special Education Network shared its work establishing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in inclusive early childhood education settings. The network helped to create intentionally designed spaces, flexible materials, and responsive teaching in participating classrooms with the goal of giving every student meaningful and accessible learning opportunities.
- The High-Quality IEPs project explained its self-determination framework in support of student-centered, asset-based IEPs.
- The Supporting Innovative Practices (SIP) project presented evaluation results from five years of technical assistance within the California Statewide System of Support (CSSOS) to support inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Staff from SIP grantee districts shared how SIP has helped them improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.
- The UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning presented an overview of efforts related to research, educator preparation, and policy, as well as resources for addressing and preventing the bullying of students who have learning disabilities or are neurodivergent.
- Representatives from the California Center for Inclusive Colleges spoke about the state's inclusive college programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- School Services of California discussed strategies for building inclusive school programs by

layering and blending funds.

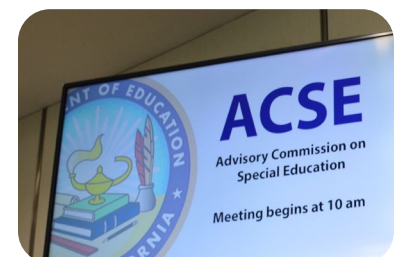
- The WarmLine Family Empowerment Center reviewed its peer mentoring resources and described its collaboration with the Special Education Division (SED) and Pathways to Partnership to provide resources for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Pathways to Partnership also reported on the provision of ADR resources to parents and families in collaboration with SED's Constituent Support Office.
- Special Olympics representatives described how sports can facilitate social inclusion for students with disabilities.
- The Arc of California shared its organization's policy and program priorities, specifically addressing how protections for children are being cut at the federal level and the anxiety experienced by caregivers as a result.
- The Office of Community Restoration described its efforts to expand education, behavioral health, and re-entry support for young people involved in the justice system.
- Educational interpreters for students who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) described the shortage of qualified interpreters for these students and efforts to create a national standard for interpreters. State Director of Special Schools Dr. Nancy Hlibok-Amann informed commissioners about the importance of reconsidering an existing waiver that allows school districts to hire under-qualified interpreters—a temporary measure that has become standard practice. LEAD-K Family Services explained the importance of assessments for American Sign Language (ASL) communication in early education for students who are DHH and deaf-blind. DHH students from Sonoma County's Hidden Valley Elementary School and their teachers described services and interpretation

offered by their school in a variety of modalities and languages, including ASL and Spanish.

- A Journify representative talked about an artificial intelligence tool that helps free up teachers' time by assisting with compliance and tracking outcomes.

State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report: CDE provided regular updates to the commission on the State Performance Plan (SPP), which incorporates data on the state's progress relative to the 17 indicators established by the U.S. Department of Education to ensure compliance with the IDEA and to improve outcomes for students.

Reports from the Special Education Division: The ACSE is charged with closely studying the work of the California Department of Education (CDE), Special Education Division (SED), to ensure: (1) that students with disabilities receive the services they are entitled to and (2) that federal IDEA dollars are spent appropriately to provide those services. This year, the ACSE welcomed regular updates from SED about its plans and progress. Reports from SED Director Rachel Heenan and other representatives highlighted legislative and funding updates, the division's priorities, and the new Constituent Support Office. John Burch from CDE presented on dually identified students who qualify for both English Learner and Special Education services and the need to disentangle the challenge of second-language acquisition from the possibility of intellectual disabilities. ■



ACSE Impact Award

ACSE honored Rosedell Elementary School in the Saugus Union School District with the 2025-26 ACSE Impact Award at the June meeting. Rosedell was chosen from a strong pool of applicants for this prestigious annual honor in recognition of their exceptional inclusion program and their work around inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Program highlights include:

Full inclusion: all students, even those with extensive support needs, are integrated directly into general education classrooms;

Specialized staffing: collaborative co-teaching, scaffolding and differentiated instruction serve all learners simultaneously;

Inclusive demonstrations: the school serves as a model demonstration site in partnership with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE).

"This entire school is a truly remarkable place in how they strive to support the success of ALL students, especially how they include those with special needs," said Saugus Unified School District Superintendent Dr. Colleen Hawkins. "We have always known how special each staff



member is at Rosedell, and what a difference they make, but now so does everyone in California."

The award was presented in partnership with SELPA Administrators of California and California

County Superintendents.

For 20 years ACSE has been highlighting best practices and "what is working" in California for students with disabilities. Recognizing and celebrating exemplary programs that result in positive outcomes for students with disabilities is a high priority of ACSE and is earmarked with a monetary award and encouragement of implementation of similar programs throughout the state.

ACSE accepts Impact Award submissions every winter/spring and encourages all special education programs across the state to apply, even those who have applied before. Check the website for more information about this year's winner along with application details: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/acseimpactaward.asp> ■

Listening and Learning: Liaisons and the Public

The State Board of Education, the State Senate, and the State Assembly each regularly appoint a member to serve as a liaison to the ACSE. These individuals keep the ACSE apprised of and connected to work in the state that focuses on improving school outcomes for students with disabilities and addressing the challenges in serving them. ACSE liaisons serve

as an invaluable presence on the commission by providing timely and accurate information on the important work overseen by these governmental organizations.

ACSE commission members also serve as liaisons to key organizations such as Family Empowerment Centers, the Council for Exceptional Children, and agencies involved in the Statewide System of Support.

The ACSE appreciates members of the public and partner organizations who contribute during the General Public Comment phase of the meetings. Although the commission is not able to take action on specific situations, hearing from the public is vital to the ACSE's work. ■

A Look Forward

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of IDEA, I am reminded that anniversaries are not just about celebration. They are about recommitment. We must keep the civil rights flame represented by IDEA alive and we must put it into practice. Accountability means honoring the dignity of every student by keeping our word—keeping promises to

children who cannot afford for us to fail. IDEA ensures we must keep trying and keep improving.

Let's keep dreaming big for every student, across California and beyond. Let's keep dreaming big for the next 50 years...for the world we have yet to imagine.

This work is complex. It is demanding. And it matters.

-Sarah Notch, ACSE Chair ■

