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INTRODUCTION

*names have been changed to protect identity

THE SYSTEMIC ISSUES were a causal chain for the special education program in the Shawnee Mission School District.

Relationships between administration and families, according to former SMSD employees and affiliated parents, aren't valued like they were a decade ago throughout the program, leading to employees feeling undervalued and underappreciated. Those feelings fed into the job turnover the district has faced, according to the former employees — 11 appointments opposed to 11 resignations, five retirements and two leaves of absence since January this year, per SMSD Board documents.

Classes associated with Special Education have swelled to sizes teachers cannot control, according to East students who participate in SPED-oriented courses — and with the turnover, students feel it could get worse. Then come issues of policy within individual buildings, causing students to question the logic of order.

Students, families and teachers have been let down by the district, at times — some prompted to leave their jobs, retire or move.

But after a range of difficulties faced by teachers, students and their families, concerned parties are tasking the district with implementing changes to their current SPED system — and with new administration set to take the helm later this year, the district has spent the last year focusing on completing specific, forward goals and setting the table for new ones to turn the page.

“The kids are what matter to us the most,” former SMSD SPED administrator and coordinator Debbie Lair said. “And right now, it’s about moving forward for the district. March on. I’d say they should get it back together, and get it back together fast.”

REVOLVING DOORS

THE IMPORTANCE OF properly staffing the district’s special education program is clear to student and teacher advocate Liz Meitl — who works to support families who have had problems with the district. Meitl filed a formal complaint citing problems like a lack of staffing against the district in 2017, after talking to over 35 families

and hundreds of teachers. Improvement, she said, can’t begin until jobs are filled with certified and experienced applicants.

The job turnover at the district has long been a problem, according to Meitl. But Dr. Christy Ziegler, ever since her appointment as Interim Director of SPED on July 23 of last year, has prioritized sufficient staffing of the department.

The issue transcends the district alone, she said — conversations about the widespread lack of potential applicants between other directors of special education are actively occurring, and teacher license requirements are continuously discussed between the district and the Kansas State Department of Education.

The shortage extends nationwide, even, according to Dr. Joan Robbins, former Director of Special Education at Blue Valley Schools. NPR reports show 49 states claiming to have a “shortage of special education teachers/related service personnel,” and according to findings in 2016 by the Education Week Research Center, there were nearly 348,000 special educators for 5.9 million special education students ages 6-21.

To proactively locate and fill open positions with certified special educators, Ziegler and the SMSD have scanned colleges and universities — recruiting at schools like the University of Kansas, Kansas State University and Pittsburg State University as well as moving to schools outside the state in order to find qualified, potential applicants.

“Now is the time where you’ll see more hiring start to happen,” Ziegler said. “We’ve gone through reference checks, and it’s a matter of then matching up people with open positions in buildings and making sure everybody is a good fit together.”

Special educators, Ziegler said, have an added responsibility which “comes with the requirements for IEP documentation due to federal and state laws that govern special education,” which can sway potential educators from entering the field.

Additional job rotation and turnover can, and have, stemmed from the reorganization of employees, according to former SMSD behavior specialist Sharon Klose.

Klose taught at the district for 29 years as a behavior specialist to all of East’s subsequent feeder schools, working in specific locations with students that “had behavior concerns” and setting up programs and assistance for them and their families. Behavior specialists were there for kids who needed help, Klose said — and she had a specific, substantial

caseload for special education students. She would see individual students two to three times a week, some from kindergarten until their freshman year.

Three years ago, the district decided to “do away” with their behavior specialists, transferring some to jobs that required a different form of specific training, which the specialists did not have, Klose said — such as working with high-needs students with severe handicaps.

She still has no clue as to why. These were some of the most experienced teachers the SPED program had to offer, according to Klose — “Master’s degrees plus.”

Restructuring efforts like these brought in new and largely inexperienced workers to fill the gaps in the interest of money, as well as prompting dissatisfied workers to leave the district, according to previous SMSD employees.

“Every time they lose [an employee], they’ve lost all of that person’s expertise and knowledge about how the system works,” Meitl said. “Stemming the bloodletting that is the loss of SPED teachers right now would be a huge first step [for the district].”

After a semester that saw 11 total special education job appointments, six were reported Human Resource documents from the April 22 Board Meeting. Ziegler is confident that the department will have filled enough SPED positions to open the coming school year fully staffed.

HAND IN HAND

DEBBIE LAIR’S TAKEAWAY from her five years in the district came in the form of relationships — both in the way that there was a lack of them while she was there, and how she came to realize their importance.

The SMSD, Meitl said, hasn’t covered the bases required — she found that families were being “lied to, mistreated [and] misled” in their encounters with district administration. According to Meitl, teachers tend to have the best intentions and do their best, but are ultimately restricted by administration and policy.

Relationships should be built, Lair said, between all sections of the special education program: administrators to teachers, administrators to families and students, teachers to families and students, etc. Without them, she said, success isn’t viable for any party.

“You have to invite dialogue, and an open dialogue with people on the front line, especially, is critical,”

Lair said. “You have to be out on school campuses every day in case you’re needed. It doesn’t do you any good to be sitting in the central office. There’s nothing to do but paperwork, and you can do that later.”

For Ziegler, relationships are of the highest interest.

“It’s about getting to really know as many of our staff as possible, so that number one, I can understand what the concerns are that they may have,” Ziegler said. “And I can also ask questions and hear directly from them in a setting that’s comfortable and where we can grow, and see what our needs are for the future.”

Included in these efforts is Sherry Dumolien, who is set to take over as Director of Special Education in July. According to Ziegler, Dumolien has been meeting with teachers, collecting input and building close relationships in preparation for the job.

The connection of students to outside resources and teachers are also elemental to Ziegler, who has worked on furthering initiatives to support and connect SPED students to both teachers and job opportunities with the district’s post-high school program, for students aged 18-21. In the program, students who have not yet reached their graduation goals are allowed to receive additional services for an additional three years — furthering their vocational and work skills, and how to enter specific businesses and jobs.

The next level, Ziegler said, is Project SEARCH, which the district will be entering its second year of partnership with this Fall. The program allows SMSD students with developmental disabilities to intern full-time at the AdventHealth Shawnee Mission hospital. The seven current interns in the program learn and improve their vocational and work skills, as well as how to go into business or industry, Ziegler said.

Beyond the district, the importance of relationships and connection is notably felt — specifically in the Blue Valley School District. Enid Dodson has a daughter with Down syndrome named Emma. Dodson has raised Emma through Blue Valley’s special education program. Starting at the district’s early childhood special education program — comprised of six special education students, six general education and peer model students — Emma went through an elementary school that tailored to her needs, a middle school with a “magnificent” team and eventually to Blue Valley West High School, where Emma attends as a sophomore.

The process was mostly advantageous, Dodson said, and many lasting relationships were formed. But like virtually any school district, Dodson said, Blue Valley had its problems for Emma.

One such problem came her fifth-grade year due to speech path difficulties and responsibilities “that weren’t happening.” As the Dodsons considered taking the district to due process, Enid spoke with Robbins.

“She’s the one I told that she needed to talk to the district’s attorney’s, because I would be talking to my own,” Dodson said. “I didn’t end up pursuing it, and she and I grew to develop a very positive and healthy relationship over the years. And we didn’t always agree. But I always knew she had Emma’s best interest in mind, and that I was always heard. That’s a pretty stark contrast to what I’ve seen in Shawnee Mission.”

DISCONNECTED

KLOSE, LAIR, MEITL, Ziegler, Dodson and Robbins all emphasize and celebrate the importance of special educators throughout the district. It takes “an incredibly special human being,” one with “patience and love and compassion” to be one, according to Dodson. As directors, Robbins and Ziegler prioritized the support and wellbeing of who they considered to be the most integral aspect of their departments, they said.

But individual buildings in the SMSD, Ziegler said, have their own rules and policies pertaining to classes associated with special education that vary. With the more specific policies and guidelines left to buildings, some students in classes at East involving special education feel a strong disconnect, undervalued and sense a lack of management.

In the fifth hour social skills class — where general education students serve as peer mentors to special education students in order to develop sociability — the lack of communication proves detrimental to productivity, according to two-year leadership student and senior Katie Garverick.

“They’ve tried to have a lot of teachers in there, but if one of them is gone, the other ones just don’t know what to do,” Garverick said. “It’s repetitive, and it’s not beneficial.”

The class doesn’t have the dedication that it did last year, according to leadership student and junior Charlotte Wayne.* Even though the teachers mean well, she said, there is “no curriculum” and no set goals that are discussed routinely — the students

“show up to class, and then just do whatever.”

East fits all qualifications and has each required special education job staffed, according to East principal Dr. Scott Sherman. But despite the met requirements, students in the class see the with student-teacher ratio as problematic, given the class size of 46.

“This is one of the biggest classes they’ve had, this year,” leadership student and junior Sarah Lewis* said. “If you only have four teachers and that many students, it’s hard to get everyone on the same page and focused in on lessons.”

Potential problems also arise when attention is not brought to personal issues expressed by students. This is due to the high number of students the four teachers are assigned to handle, according to Lewis. She insists the issue is “obviously not their fault,” attributing it to what she sees as low requirements.

The cutoff is also felt by students seeking to join the program — such is the case for Wayne’s sister, Amanda.* Amanda was told after her interview that she’d secured a spot in the social skills class. She went home happy. The next day, she was told she couldn’t be in, anymore.

After conversations between Amanda’s mother and social skills teacher Emily MacNaughton, the family was told it was policy for “family members [not to be] in the class with other family members.” This was confusing to her — she assumed policy like that would be listed in the application or discussed in the interview, but it was not brought up by MacNaughton until the meeting. MacNaughton declined to comment for this story.

Even more confusing to her was what the policy was preventing. Amanda was one of the only people that her cousin, Olive,* was comfortable around. Olive has down syndrome, and after experiences at Indian Hills Middle School in seventh grade that caused her to feel isolated and alienated, her family decided to homeschool her the next year.

Olive’s family enrolled her at East as a freshman, and she was accepted into the social skills class. The Wayne’s and Olive’s family felt confident that she could be integrated into the schooling system again. Now, their vision is clouded.

“[Olive]’s family had comfort in knowing that I’d at least be in one of her classes, and that it would at least help her feel comfortable in a completely new environment,” Amanda said. “Me not being in that class is creating a lot more anxiety and fear than there needs to be.”

After previous problems with the SMSD SPED, a new director adds hope to future changes in the program

SPED JOB CHANGES SINCE JANUARY 2019

11

HIRINGS AND/OR APPOINTMENTS

11

RESIGNATIONS

4

OF WHICH BEING LEAVES OF ABSENCE

5

ANNOUNCED RETIREMENTS

2

ADDITIONAL LEAVES OF ABSENCE