



FUSD Teachers, Parents Voice Special Ed Concerns at Town Hall

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Parents and teachers came together Wednesday night to share their views on improving special education programs in Fresno Unified schools. The district has faced criticism for years that it doesn't adequately support its special needs students.

Fresno Unified has also [faced lawsuits by parents of special education students](#).

The town hall meeting at Hoover High School was organized by the Fresno Teachers Association and provided a venue for about 100 participants to voice their concerns and recommendations as the district considers implementing changes.

Teachers Call for Smaller Classes

Reducing the number of students in special ed classrooms was among the top issues discussed.

"Special education is about individualized education and having small class sizes to work with kids," said Gina Jones, a special education teacher at Roosevelt High School.

Trying to manage 15 or more students at the high school level, Jones said, is often too much to handle. "It becomes behavior management rather than classroom management and trying to teach," she said.

According to an FTA survey of 1,400 Fresno Unified teachers, Jones is not alone in her view.

"Ninety percent of district teachers believe that individual class size caps is the best way to improve classrooms," said FTA President Manuel Bonilla.

A majority of the survey respondents said small class sizes will also help meet the academic and social/emotional needs of their students, Bonilla said.

Vocational Training, Classroom Aides Discussed

A wider variety of program options for special education students is what Melissa Felder believes is needed.

“Fresno Unified as a whole is lacking in vocational education, not only for general education students but special education students as well,” said Felder, a special education teacher at Bullard High School.

Hoover High teacher AJ Pipkin said more qualified classroom aides are needed as well.

“Two weeks into the school year I have an aide dumped in my class and I have to teach her,” she said. “I don’t get paid to teach her, I get paid to teach my students.”

Local Feedback on Report’s Findings

Following his appointment in 2017, Superintendent Bob Nelson requested a review of the district’s special education program by the Council of the Great City Schools. The group issued its report last summer.

The goal of FTA’s town hall was to gather community recommendations. Nelson attended Wednesday’s meeting, along with several district staff members. School board president Claudia Cazares and other trustees were also present.

Bonilla said he hopes the district will take the forum feedback into consideration: “We are going to really push forward with the solutions, but that is really dependent on whether the district is willing to work collaboratively.”

Cazares struck a positive tone.

“This is an opportunity for us to grow into a better district and to provide better services for our children,” she said. The board’s goal, Cazares said, is to approve and implement a comprehensive special education plan by August.

“If there is low-hanging fruit that we can implement immediately, we will make that recommendation,” Cazares said.

Jones appreciates the district’s apparent openness to input from teachers like her.

“I am glad to see the communication is opening up and hope we are listened to because we are the ones out there doing the job,” Jones said.