

## **EDITORIAL: Fresno Unified must make special education a priority**

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Once again, there's a spotlight on Fresno Unified School District's failure to provide legally mandated services to special education students. The state says the district is violating requirements that schools provide speech services to children with communication impairments.

Fresno Unified's mishandling of special education is nothing new. For decades, there have been various problems in providing special education offerings, and the district has often chosen to fight with special education parents instead of work with them.

The latest problem stems from three allegations made by the Fresno Teachers Association, including claims that students who are eligible for speech services aren't receiving them and that meetings for some special needs students are not being held annually, as required by the law. The union also alleged that some staff required to attend the meetings didn't show up.

The California Department of Education sent investigators to Fresno in November and found all of the allegations to be true. It also said that 21 of the district's 106 schools don't have a speech-language pathologist and more than 500 students are owed make-up sessions for services they never received.

We're encouraged that instead of disputing the investigators' findings, Fresno Unified appears intent on making things right. That said, it's time for transparency from the district administration and school board on how they intend to comply with the state's mandate.

The state agrees and wants the district to submit a plan by the end of January that shows how it will staff schools that don't have a dedicated speech-language pathologist. It also must document by the end of February all students with special language needs, the types of services they require and how many days or weeks of compensatory sessions they're owed. Finally, the district must provide evidence that all speech and language staff have been trained to comply with state laws.

A statement from the district says that Fresno Unified, like districts across the country, face a shortage of speech-language pathologists. To help offset the problem, the district has offered services after school and during the summer for students who attend schools without a full-time speech specialist. The district also says it is actively recruiting qualified staff.

Clearly, the district hasn't done nearly enough. It's troubling that services for the most vulnerable students seem to be a low priority.

Superintendent Michael Hanson and school board members must change this disturbing pattern. Our students deserve better than what they've been getting.

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