

So You Want to Join a SELPA

Understanding the Risks and Rewards of SELPA Membership

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By default, at a district-approved charter's inception, it is considered a school-of-the-district for special education purposes, meaning the district receives the funding for and manages the implementation and delivery of the special education program for the charter's special education students. Sounds simple and straightforward enough, but what if your school's educational philosophy doesn't quite jive with the way in which the district delivers its special education curriculum to your students? Or, what if your charter has grown to a size where hiring your own special education teachers and aides makes more sense from a fiscal and curricular standpoint? Then you may be considering a shift from district-led special education instruction to becoming your own LEA (Local Education Agency), and joining a charter SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Area). Naturally, there are risks involved in breaking from the district's services but that doesn't mean those risks should prevent the possibility of exploration.



To be clear, schools-of-the-district are in a position in which the district bears all the risk associated with the cost of special education. This can be beneficial from a charter perspective if the charter has a higher-than-average proportion of special education students, or if some of those students have especially high service needs; the district must then provide the staff/services to meet those students' needs in accordance with their **IEPs** (Individualized Education Program), and thereby must also bear the cost. In contrast, a charter that joins a SELPA bears those risks associated with any high-costs scenarios, and must budget for those expenses from its general purpose funding. This begs the question: how does a charter assess and prepare for this risk?

Ways to Think about Risk

Because no two charters are exactly alike, there is no pre-determined, charter-wide way to begin the consideration of risk. However, schools have innovated to create models that help school leadership and boards evaluate the risks. Some of these models include "What if" scenarios in which leadership can consider the most high-cost scenarios and determine whether they're well equipped to handle the outcome. A sensitivity analysis looking at the state/district data compared to that of the charter can help leadership anticipate what the expected costs associated with different possibilities are. Finally, an analysis of the costs associated with non-public school placement in your local area can inform the charter of one potential low-incidence possibility.

Assessing the Capacity of Your Personnel and Educational Program

Before considering the purely financial aspects of risk on a budgeting basis, charter leadership should look at their current special education population and determine whether their existing program could

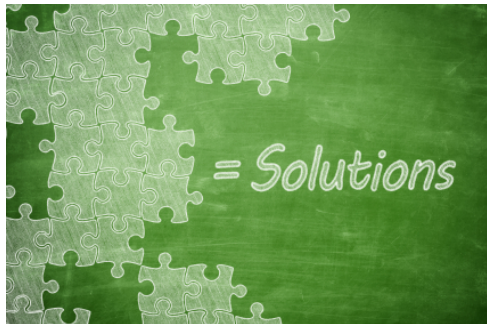
meet those students' needs; more specifically, does the school have the internal capacity and expertise to take on special education.

Personnel: Do school personnel already have the capacity or expertise to implement instruction for the current special education students? If your school isn't fully prepared, what steps would need to be taken in order to get there? Based on your current special education population, determining the number of certified special education teachers is likely straightforward, but beyond that, what other services will need to be brought in-house?

Educational Program: How well does the district's personnel integrate into your program? Has your school made a push to incorporate a Response-to-Intervention program, but these district staff members aren't fully on board? These concerns have been typical for many charters that have sought membership in a charter SELPA, as they've identified greater local control as a means to better serve all of their students. Furthermore, charters that are geared toward a specific focus – Waldorf, Montessori, Project-based Learning, etc. – have noted that personnel from their district have not been able to fully adapt to their model; after joining a SELPA, those charters have been able to hire staff that are on board with their educational model, and can address Special Education needs within it.

Assessing Cost – How to Anticipate Expenses and Revenues

First-year Budget: Naturally, when assessing risk, financial risk dominates the conversation. In general, school-of-the-district charters should design an initial budget, planning to spend more than the revenues they will receive from the state. Charter SELPAs have indicated that, in general, schools spend about 40% more on their special education program than the revenues received, with those additional services paid for by general education funds. Therefore, in comparison to what your school currently pays for in terms of encroachment to the district, is your school's budget in good shape to develop the programmatic aspects necessary to serve your school's special education population?



Long-term Budget: In the long-term, is your school's fund balance adequate enough to cover any unplanned expenses early in the school's membership with the charter SELPA? What does the overall three-year budget look like? Anticipate what financial risks the school may have to address – facilities, legal expenses, personnel/leadership changes, etc.

There are a number of ways to manage and plan for these costs. For long-term budgeting, it's beneficial to identify the charter's budgeting approach for high-cost instances (an influx of special education students, a student with particularly high service needs, etc.), one of which is to plan a single line item for unbudgeted costs, to account for any costs that could be associated with new students or a previously unidentified student. In this instance, the school could "bank" any unused amounts from this line item into a special education reserve. Alternatively, the school could conservatively budget expenses in accordance with its current special education population, while ensuring that a reserve exists to support any unbudgeted expenses. It's important to note that this approach assumes that the school has a pre-determined target associated with its reserves, and that this amount would be sufficient to provide the school with the proper support should it need to be spent. In any case, the charter leader and the board should define the long-term approach to those special education reserves.

A Big Move in Small Steps

The idea of breaking away from your district can be daunting, but it doesn't have to be. Preparation is key, so start planning early. Ensure that your charter's financial, educational, and operational perspectives are all valued; incorporating various stakeholders and their points-of-view is key. Be sure the charter leader and the board are weighing all the options available, financially and programmatically. And lastly, define how the charter will manage the financial risk of becoming its own LEA. As stated earlier, there are a number of ways to assess/manage the risks associated with becoming your own LEA for special education. Figuring out how to manage this while providing a high-quality program is the critical component.

Additional information and resources:

EdTec's 2013 CCSA Conference Presentation—

http://www.edtec.biz/news/CCSA/EdTec_CCSA_2013_SPED.pdf

Sonoma County Charter SELPA—www.sonomaselpa.org

El Dorado COE Charter SELPA—www.edcoe.org/charterselpa

LA County SELPA—www.lacoe.edu/SpecialEducation.aspx 