

# Citing Costs, Poor Service, Charters Ditch District Special Ed

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There's a quiet, studious hum in Deborah Armusewicz's classroom. Kids dressed neatly in button-down, pine-green sweater vests and neckties politely raise their hands to answer questions while two support teachers mill around the room like earnest chaperones, pausing occasionally to whisper encouragement or corrections over a child's shoulder.

Observing this calm period at one of the two special education classes at Gompers Preparatory Academy is Jane Firpo, the school's assistant director. Firpo's eyes gleam as she watches the classroom click. She nods approvingly when kids answer correctly and stands to attention with the students as they "honor" each teacher in turn.

"Good morning Miss Armusewicz," she says, in unison with the children.

Firpo, who oversees Gompers's special education program, believes wholeheartedly in the way Gompers teaches children with special needs. She should. She and her team built it from scratch in 2009, when Gompers broke its last remaining tether to the school district.

The Chollas View school is one of dozens of local charters that have abandoned San Diego Unified School District's special education program since 2005 for reasons of quality, cost and philosophy.

Charter schools are almost entirely independent from San Diego Unified. They're independently funded and have the freedom to hire and fire employees without any input from the district. The exception is special education. Charters initially have to outsource their special education programs to the district. Charters pay the district a fee per student. In return the district sends them special education teachers.

That arrangement has proven both unwieldy and expensive for many of the district's charter schools.

Some principals say the teachers they received from the district were subpar, and that they jumped ship to ensure quality education for their students. Others say the move was all about independence: They wanted the freedom to hire teachers who believe in their school's philosophy, and who aren't tied to set working hours or conditions by union contracts.

But one of the main reasons that charters have left is money. The per-student fee the district charges charter schools has been growing rapidly. In 2004, it was \$440 a student. Today, it's \$888

a student.

The swelling fee results from a trend that's troubling to the San Diego Unified school board: The cost of educating children with special needs in the district has risen despite a declining number of special education students.

The district's currently struggling to understand both the exodus of charters and the upsurge in the cost of educating its students with disabilities.

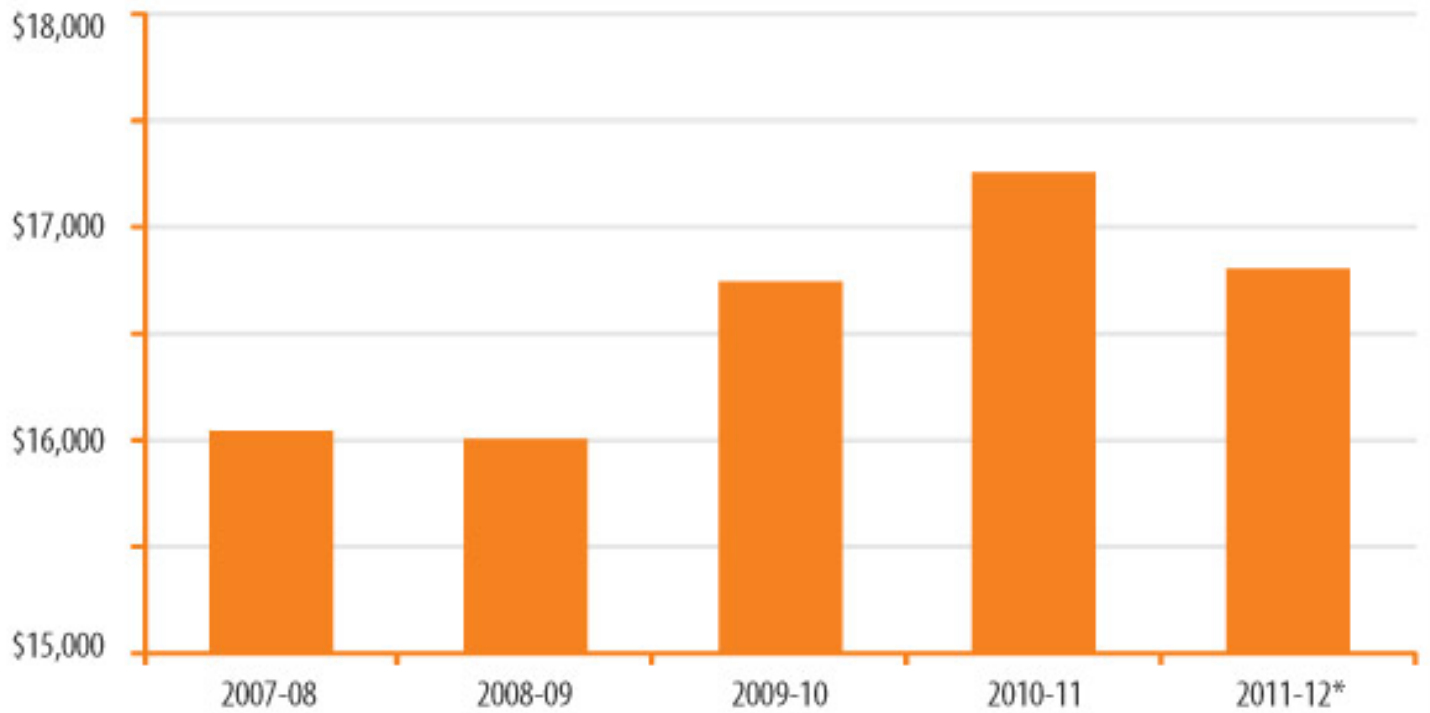
The money issue comes at an especially sensitive time for the district. Facing a financial crisis, it's been scrounging for every dollar and has again threatened hundreds of layoffs. Meanwhile, the district's special education program has bitten deeper and deeper into its budget.

San Diego Unified already spends almost twice as much as it gets from the state to fund special education, and the program now accounts for about one-quarter of the district's \$1.1 billion budget.

Trustee Scott Barnett is concerned that nobody at the district seems to know whether the program is running efficiently.

"How can we know if we're spending money effectively if we really don't know where we're spending it?" Barnett said. "The problem is that the more you ask, the more you realize how dysfunctional the spending of our resources is at any level."

## Costs Per Student for Special Education



\* FY 2011-12 is a projected estimate. All others are actuals. All figures adjusted for inflation.  
Source: San Diego Unified School District

Graphic by Keegan Kyle / VOSD

### Fleeing for the Price Tag

Last fall, on the first day of the first year at Old Town Academy, the school's executive director met a district aide who would teach special education at his new charter school.

Tom Donahue, Old Town's co-founder and executive director, found the special education support to be second-to-none. The few kids with special needs at his small school get all the specialized instruction they need.

"We're getting the gold service," he said.

Yet Donahue wants out of the program as soon as he can.

The reason is simple: Money.

The almost \$200,000 a year Old Town Academy sends the district for special education services amounts to about one-fifth of the per-student funding the school receives from the state and almost 10 percent of his school's total budget. He estimates he can halve the cost of his program by leaving the district and instead signing up with a group of 19 other charter schools that now organize their own special education programs.

It's a no-brainer.

The per-student fee has been rising steadily because they're linked to the amount San Diego

Unified spends on its special education program.

In California, schools get most of their money for special education from the state, which currently sends San Diego Unified almost \$730 for every enrolled student — not every student with special needs — specifically to teach kids with disabilities.

At San Diego Unified, that amounts to about \$133 million this year. But that's nowhere near enough to fund the district's special education program, which this year will cost about \$257 million.

The shortfall means the district has to dig into its budget to find \$124 million to fund special education. The district doesn't know why its program costs so much more than the state provides.

### Forging a New Path

The leadership of High Tech High School was growing frustrated in 2004.

The four-year-old charter school had been created to provide a whole new model of education within the district, focused on project-based learning.

The approach was working well. The organization was thriving and plans were in the works to create additional schools.

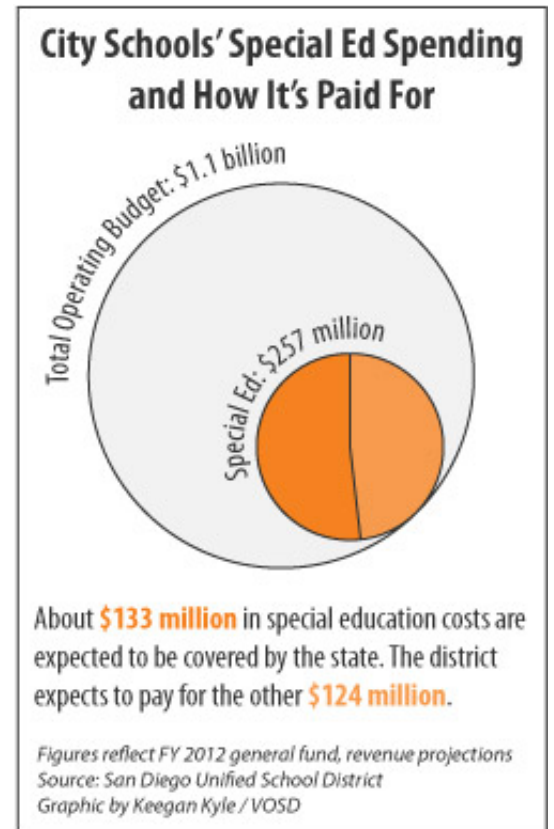
But a problem remained. As it had cemented itself into the local consciousness, High Tech High's population of children with special needs had grown. Like every new charter in San Diego, High Tech High received its special education teachers, technology and support staff, like psychologists and speech therapists, from the district.

That wasn't working out well at all.

Teachers had to wait for weeks before the district sent them the special education specialists they needed, and when specialists did arrive, they were often harried, since they were rushing from one charter school to the next, school officials said.

The growing cost of San Diego Unified's special education program also meant the school had to pay an additional \$440 fee every year for each one of its students to continue receiving special education services.

By 2004, High Tech High's founder, Larry Rosenstock had had enough. He wanted to be



completely free from the district.

The details of the arrangement Rosenstock eventually established are complex, but the upshot of his efforts was that, a year later, High Tech High was free.

He found a way to bypass the district, so the school could get its state money directly and provide its own services. The move threw open the door for other charters to follow.

### **How Do They Do That?**

Breaking free from the district gave High Tech High the autonomy to architect its special education program according to the school's vision.

It also had a parallel effect: Freeing the organization from the ever-swelling cost of educating students with disabilities at San Diego Unified.

Unlike the district, High Tech High runs its special education program without eating significantly into the rest of its budget.

That could mean that High Tech High is much more efficient at spending its money than the district. But Bob Parker, director of special education services at High Tech High, and others, aren't so sure that's the main reason for the higher cost at San Diego Unified.

The district has a much higher proportion of children with severe disabilities than most charter schools, Parker said. Parents of children with severe disabilities are more likely to choose a district-run school with a special-education track record than a charter school.

In general, the more severe a child's disability, the more expensive they are to educate. So it stands to reason that the district's program costs more.

For example, a child with severe autism may require a one-on-one aide for the entire school day, which comes at a significant cost.

As his schools have become more established and more trusted by local parents, Parker said he's seen an uptick in the number of more challenging, more expensive-to-teach students enrolling at High Tech High campuses.

That's driven up his per-student cost, he said.

"It's a great problem to have," Parker said. "We're a bit of a victim of our own success, but I'd much rather have this problem than have the problem that we're not serving kids."

### **Teachers Who Believe**

San Diego Unified Chief of Staff Bernie Rhinerson acknowledges that the district possibly didn't do a very good job of serving its special needs population during the early 2000s.

"I've heard those same sorts of stories about special ed in the past, but we feel we've addressed those problems," Rhinerson said. "That department is tremendously improved."

But for many charter schools, leaving the district's special education program isn't just about being able to design a new, more efficient and less expensive special education program.

It's also about philosophy.

Jeannette Vaughn, elementary principal at Albert Einstein Academies, which broke free from the district's special education program in 2010, said the move has allowed her to hire teachers who believe in the intercultural educational model practiced at the school.

When her school was still getting services from the district, Vaughn said, she was often sent teachers who weren't necessarily bad at their jobs, they just weren't a good fit for the program she and her team had spent years crafting.

"You just know when you interview people," Vaughn said. "You have to have the right fit, and if you're just being sent Teacher Number 44 on a list, you don't know if that person buys into what you believe."

Vince Riveroll, the director of Gompers, agreed.

The whole point of becoming a charter school was to refocus Gompers and to inject the school with a new approach to educating children, Riveroll said. In special education, that was impossible to accomplish with teachers who were sent over each year by the district, he said.

"Those candidates were just sent here, they had no background knowledge of Gompers and what our mission is," Riveroll said.

The movement towards independence is also about giving schools the freedom to hire employees like Firpo.

Firpo was one of the special education teachers the district sent over when Gompers was still a part of San Diego Unified's program. At the school, she found a model of teaching that she believed in.

The school's leaders recognized her belief. So when they ditched the district, they hired her.

*Correction: The original version of this story misstated the fee charged to charter schools by the district. It is \$888, not \$953. The greater figure was provided by a source at a charter school and the district was given several opportunities to confirm it prior to the publication of this story. The correct figure was provided early on Tuesday morning after the article's publication.*

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