

New SELPA Director Strives for More Special Education Funding

By Jennifer Wake

Nearly 700,000 students with disabilities require special education services in school districts throughout California, yet according to newly hired Contra Costa Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Director Stephany La Londe, only a small percentage of the allotted funding is reaching the schools.

One of La Londe's many goals for this area is to obtain more funding for special education from state and federal governments. She and other SELPA directors recently joined the E.C.H.O. Coalition (Every Child Holds Opportunity) which was developed to build awareness and support for adequate funding of special education.

"We're trying to get adequate funding for special education," La Londe said to parents, staff and community representa-

tives at a recent SELPA Community Advisory Committee meeting. "Laws came in saying how much funding should be applied to special education, but right now we're at about 17 percent of this funding."

According to statistics provided by the E.C.H.O. Coalition, the number of school-aged children with disabilities in California has increased exponentially – much of that attributed to a 480 percent increase in autism, and increases of nearly 50 percent in children with emotional disturbance and hearing problems. With federal and state funding for these students at such a low level, many school districts in California have been forced to cut programs for all students to make up for special education budget shortfalls.

La Londe hopes that through efforts like the E.C.H.O.

Coalition and other endeavors, school districts throughout California can obtain the necessary funds they need to serve all students.

As Director of Contra Costa SELPA, La Londe acts as the special education expert, trouble shooter, peace-maker and administrator of coordinated services provided to member districts, which include the Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda and Acalanes school districts.

With federal and state funding woefully below what is needed to serve this diverse student population, La Londe and her colleagues have a tough job ahead. "Every child should receive an appropriate education," she said. "Hopefully, with a very organized campaign, we can get some funding to continue the wonderful work we do."



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