

REPORT

of the

PUBLIC REVIEW COMMITTEE

on the

SPECIAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

of

ST. LOUIS COUNTY

June 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
of the
Report of the Public Review Committee of 2009-2010
on the
Special School District of St. Louis County

In 1996 the Missouri Legislature mandated that a Public Review Committee (PRC) be appointed for a one-year period to review the Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD), and that such a committee be appointed every four years thereafter. Accordingly, this Public Review Committee, the fourth one, was constituted in 2009, pursuant to Section 162.858, Revised Statutes of Missouri.

The Statute specifically sets forth and mandates the duties of the PRC which are “to conduct a thorough review . . . of the structure, governance, administration, financial management, delivery of services, cooperation with component school districts, the district’s role as an advocate for handicapped and severely handicapped children, and compliance with sections 162.850 to 162.589, regarding conflicts and responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the citizens of the special school district.”

The Committee assumed that the legislature’s intent was for the PRC to ensure that SSD fulfill its mission and function at a level comparable to that achieved by other public school districts perceived to be successful. Accordingly, we assumed that our task was to determine whether any of the major concerns about SSD, which led the Legislature to mandate the convening of a PRC every four years, are significant concerns at this time.

Given those assumptions and the criteria stipulated in the law, our overall conclusion is essentially the same as that rendered by the PRC of four years ago. **SSD merits an undisputed pass.** The satisfactory circumstances cited at that time have been maintained and the positive trends identified have continued. Since we did not identify concerns in kind or number beyond those one would typically expect, we could have met our statutory charge by affirming that the SSD is continuing to meet its mission satisfactorily, and signed off at that point.

We did not, however, reach our judgment lightly by conducting a superficial walk-through or drive-by. Rather, we obtained and processed an enormous amount of information during the course of our review by examining all relevant documents, conducting and assessing scientific surveys, contacting scores of institutions and organizations, publicizing widely the purpose of the PRC, holding public forums and inviting citizen and parent responses in multiple ways.

Dr. E. Terrence Jones, a professional pollster and Political Science professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, conducted a County-wide scientific survey, with a polling sample of approximately 1,100. Responses produced approval ratings generally ranging from 80-94 percent, and disapproval from 4-8 percent. These results were slightly, but usually not statistically, better than those on a similar survey conducted in 2006. The more the respondents, including parents, knew about SSD, the more positive their responses were.

While our intensive review documented our unequivocal “pass” of SSD, it also produced some concerns which are very troubling to a small number of persons. Virtually all concerns at this time come from parents and are related to the delivery of services rather than governance, administration

and fiscal areas. In fairness to the persons who took the time and made the effort to share their concerns, and in order to maximize the value of our efforts, we opted to devote a major portion of our report to acknowledging and examining those concerns. The fact that we have included all concerns, even if often expressed by only one person, while we have not detailed the highly positive overall view of SSD in the same manner, should not be construed as giving inordinate space to and placing undue emphasis on the negative. Our purpose in doing so is to facilitate SSD's becoming an even more successful organization.

Although it was not a cause for complaint, we believe, as did the 2006 PRC, that one of the most significant potential issues is ensuring that the Governing Council continues to function effectively in executing its crucial responsibilities. Thus far the Council has served well as a total body, although not all districts appear to be actively and effectively represented. It is essential that the membership be well informed about its responsibilities, that it insist on having the information necessary to meet those responsibilities, that it include some seasoned leadership and minimize turnover, and that members serve as active liaisons between their districts and SSD at all times.

The relationship between the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) and the Governing Council continues to be less than satisfactory and a source of frustration. Both Councils appear to be working in good faith, but the Governing Council seems often not to be the appropriate body to resolve PAC concerns. Finding ways to facilitate the role of the PAC and enable it to function more effectively within the larger SSD/partner district framework would be constructive and alleviate considerable perplexity and frustration on the part of both groups.

The 2006 PRC report, in also going beyond its basic charge, included rather definitive discussions of several topics, including the unique status of SSD, the provision for partnership agreements between SSD and the partner districts, equity of services, the challenges of a massive and geographically far-flung district and staff like SSD, the resolution of differences between the districts, the crucial role of the Governing Council, least restrictive environment, and the role of SSD as advocate. Although the discussions are still applicable and the topics will continue to be issues that require ongoing attention, we chose not to repeat the statements since the report is available in the SSD central office.

The circumstances of the 1980s and 1990s which resulted in the 1996 legislation requiring the formation of a PRC every four years have changed dramatically. If the Missouri legislature were examining SSD today, it is hard to imagine that the concept of and the need for a PRC would even occur to legislators. The longer SSD does well the job it was created to do, the less the need for a PRC, and the less it needs to do. While not making a recommendation, in the near future the legislature may want to change the statute so that the PRC meets less often or perhaps only under certain circumstances. An additional reason for modifying the law would be to update the language by eliminating use of the term "handicapped."

In conclusion, we are convinced that SSD is governed and administered effectively by the current SSD Board of Education, Governing Council, Superintendent and administrative staff. A dedicated and highly trained SSD staff continues to provide a complete continuum of invaluable special services to tens of thousands of students, and to approximately 15 percent of the school age population.

We hope that readers of this Summary will be motivated to examine the full report. It is available at, or a copy can be obtained from, the Office of the Superintendent of Special School District at 12110 Clayton Road, St. Louis, Mo. 63131, phone 314 989-8281.

Report of the Public Review Committee of 2009-2010 on the Special School District of St. Louis County

I. Introduction and Background

A. Committee Membership

The nine members of the Public Review Committee consisted of the following persons, appointed by the organizations indicated, and as required by statute.

<u>Parent Advisory Committee</u>	<u>Governing Council</u>	<u>Department of Elementary and Secondary Education</u>
Ms. Satonya Booker, Vice Chair	Dr. George R. Albin, III	Dr. Lynn Beckwith, Jr.
Ms. Eleanor Perkins	Mr. Ron Kuschel	Dr. Paul Doerrer
Ms. Donnell Probst	Ms. Mary Oswald	Dr. John Heskett, Chair

B. Authority and Charge

In 1996 the Missouri Legislature mandated that a Public Review Committee (PRC) be appointed for a one-year period to review the Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD), and that such a committee be appointed every four years thereafter. Accordingly, this PRC was constituted in 2009, pursuant to Section 162.858, Revised Statutes of Missouri. This report is a summary of the work and findings of the current and fourth PRC.

The Statute specifically sets forth and mandates the duties of the PRC which are “to conduct a thorough review . . . of the

1. structure,
2. governance,
3. administration,
4. financial management,
5. delivery of services,
6. cooperation with component school districts,
7. the District’s role as an advocate for handicapped and severely handicapped children, and
8. compliance with sections 162.850 to 162.589, regarding conflicts and responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the citizens of the special school district.”

(When specifically quoting the law, the term “handicapped” has been retained.)

C. Historical Context of Legislation

Because some readers of this report may not be familiar with the context in which the above legislation was enacted, and because circumstances regarding the SSD have changed so dramatically since 1996, it may be helpful to review the conditions which caused the Missouri legislature to require the formation of a PRC every four years.

Those who are familiar with the SSD during the 1980s and 1990s will remember that the District experienced some unusual turmoil at that time. There were charges of misdirected spending, overspending, deficits and disappearing balances. The District was besieged by special interest pressures and charges that those groups elected and controlled the Board and stifled working conditions in the District. The local districts lost confidence in the SSD leadership, and the District lost its credibility and support. Some Board members even set up offices at the district center. They essentially took over the administration of the District. Superintendents came and went in rapid fashion. The District was frequently in the news but almost always for the wrong reasons. Board meetings frequently elicited a derogatory headline or a scathing editorial in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

These circumstances activated a succession of studies of the District and several outside and State audits which seemed generally to be disregarded by SSD. The continuation and persistence of these conditions prompted the convening of Missouri Senate sub-committee hearings in 1995. Chaired by then Senator Wayne Goode, the sub-committee called many witnesses, and any interested party was encouraged to testify about the District. Testimony ranged from pleas to “save the best and fix the rest” to demands for dissolution of the District. Many people indeed thought that the District should be disbanded. Many others thought that it would not survive and feared what the ramifications of its demise would mean.

Given those conditions, it is easy to understand, first, why a PRC requirement was legislated and, second, why the legislature assigned the duties stated above to the PRC. There was indeed a time when conflict with, rather than “cooperation with component school districts,” was common, a time when SSD sometimes seemed to be an advocate for special interest groups rather than assuming a “role as an advocate for handicapped and severely handicapped children,” and a time when SSD seemed oblivious to “conflicts and responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the citizens” (the topics of Sections VI, VII and VIII). If the Missouri legislature were examining SSD today, it is hard to imagine that the concept of and the need for a PRC would even occur to legislators. Because of the vastly different circumstances today, some of the responsibilities given the PRC now seem irrelevant. Consequently, in some cases there is little if anything to report. Indeed, the longer SSD does well the job it was created to do, the less the need for a PRC, and the less it needs to do.

Nevertheless, for ease of reading and, if desired, for comparison and reference to earlier reports, we have included an outline in this report that generally parallels the topics mandated and stated above. Under each topic, the PRC has included three sections which a) review the current status of the District and discuss related developments, if any, since 2006, the date of the last PRC review, b) present issues/concerns which were identified by the Committee and/or brought to its attention, and c) make recommendations if the issues/concerns were deemed to warrant recommendations.

D. Procedural Assumptions

We proceeded on the assumption that the Missouri legislature expected the PRC to determine whether SSD is generally fulfilling its mission at a level comparable to that maintained by other public school districts perceived to be successful, rather than expecting SSD to be a flawless institution held to a higher set of standards. In other words, we did not expect nor insist that SSD stand out as the “best” school district in the area, but rather that it consistently meet reasonable expectations and fulfill its mission. Conversely, it would not be acceptable for SSD to have, or to be perceived as having, problems which stand out when compared to those of other effectively

functioning districts. More specifically, do any of the major problems and dysfunctions about SSD, which led the legislature more than a decade ago to mandate the convening of a PRC every four years, continue to be significant concerns?

E. The Verdict—How It Is in 2010

Given those assumptions and criteria, our overall conclusion is essentially the same as that rendered by the PRC of four years ago. **SSD merits an undisputed pass.** We could virtually have endorsed and signed off on the report of 2006. Some of the players and some of the details have changed, and some topics have become history, but the positive trends identified then have continued. Since we identified no uncommon concerns, we could have met our statutory charge by affirming that the SSD is meeting its mission satisfactorily, and then signed off at this point.

F. Reaching the Verdict—PRC Activities

Because we did not reach our conclusion lightly by conducting a superficial “walk-through” or “drive-by,” we believe it is advisable also to outline the process which we followed. Further, although much of our report may be technically gratuitous, we heard and learned much during the course of our study, some of which we believe is well worth sharing with SSD leadership and any other interested parties.

The SSD Superintendent convened the PRC’s first meeting on November 18, 2009. Subsequently we obtained and processed an enormous amount of information during the course of our review—budgets and projections, audits, rolling plans, Missouri School Improvement and state reports, APR and AYP reports, annual reports, staff surveys, staffing grids, disaggregated achievement results, placement, discipline, graduation, drop-out, and transition data. We surveyed the general public and the parents of students receiving services via a scientific, professional poll and analyzed the responses. We contacted scores of organizations and purchase-of-service groups who have working relations with SSD. We met with and questioned many SSD and partner district staff members. In summary, we pursued all practical avenues available to facilitate access to the PRC and to inform ourselves.

More specifically, the Committee conducted eight open business meetings and four public forums. Approximately 40 persons attended the forums. Approximately 30 of them made statements. Eight letters were received, three of which were complimentary rather than expressions of concern. The statements of concern are reported later in this report and summarized in Appendix A. One of the letters was from Missouri Parents Act (MPACT), an organization that provides parent training and information. The concerns conveyed in MPACT’s letter are included among the concerns stated later in this report. The letter uses the phrase “received many parent calls,” but since it does not indicate the number of calls, the specific nature of each call, nor the time frame over which the calls were received, we were not able to quantify the numbers.

The PRC also initiated and held special meetings with the SSD Parent Advisory Committee (PAC), the SSD Board of Education, the SSD Governing Council, the SSD Superintendent and Administrative Council, and the Career and Technical Education Advisory Committee. Partner district Superintendents who work with, and whose districts are served by, SSD were asked for but expressed no concerns about SSD. Over 60 regional service agencies which may likely have had some association with SSD at some time, were invited in writing to respond if, and as, they wished.

The Missouri Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and the St. Louis Archdiocese Superintendent of Schools were contacted. The Committee also offered to meet with any of the groups and individuals contacted. No requests were received from these parties.

Since SSD is subject to Missouri School Improvement reviews and DESE supervision and requirements just as other districts are, we made no effort to duplicate those ongoing efforts. We did, however, examine the reviews and found no irregularities or persistent deficiencies identified by them.

The results of our efforts in totality were predominantly positive. We did not identify any specific concerns or pattern of concerns which rose to the level of significance for which PRCs were mandated by legislation. Our decision that SSD is successfully meeting the test created by the legislature is based on the sum of all these efforts.

G. Survey Results

Dr. E. Terrence Jones, a professional public opinion pollster and Political Science professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, was commissioned to conduct a scientific survey of parents and the general public of St. Louis County. The survey included a sample of approximately 1,100 persons, which included 625 parents of students receiving special services, 200 parents of career (vocational/technical) education students, and 305 members of the general public. These respondents were sub-divided into three groups: parents of children with 1) high incidence disabilities, 2) low incidence disabilities, and 3) severe/sensory disabilities. Dr. Jones also conducted a survey for the PRC in 2006. So that the 2006 results could be used as a baseline for comparison to 2010 results, we elected to include the same or similar survey items when they were still applicable.

While Dr. Jones characterized the 2006 results as “about as good as it gets,” the overall 2010 results were slightly better, though results for specific items were usually not sufficiently different to be statistically significant. In comparison to other public institutions in the area, according to Dr. Jones, the respondents ranked only Washington University and the St Louis Zoo higher.

More specifically, based on a five-point scale (A,B,C,D,F type), parents with students receiving special services gave SSD an overall Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.46, up from 3.39 in 2006. Parents with students in the career (vocational/technical) education schools rated the schools at 3.51. The general public response was 3.02 versus 2.89, a statistically significant improvement. The SSD instructional staff received a mark of 3.14, up from 3.06, and also a statistically significant improvement. Approval ratings on various items generally ranged from 80-94 percent, disapproval from 4-8 percent. The more the respondents, including parents, knew about SSD, the more positive their responses were.

Additional survey results will be referred to later in this report. The executive summary of the survey is included as Appendix B, and the complete results of the survey are available in the file documentation in the Special School District office.

H. 2010 and Beyond

As we consider the past and contemplate the future of SSD, it seems appropriate to repeat and reaffirm several statements from past reports. In 2002, PRC2 stated that “the turnaround at SSD

since the first PRC review [in 1998] has been remarkable.” It further affirmed that “the Board of Education and Superintendent have achieved a climate conducive to positive change, brought credibility to the District, embody integrity and public mindedness that taxpayers and voters rightly expect.” In 2006, PRC3 stated that the 2002 assessment was made “with some tentativeness since the trends were recent and SSD had a long history of reversing directions frequently. The good news in 2006 is that the positive directions have been sustained and incorporated into SSD’s mode of operation.” The additional good news in 2010 is that PRC4 can confirm that the same positive climate has clearly been sustained and that SSD’s modus operandi has been further reinforced.

The 2006 PRC report, in also going beyond its basic charge, included rather definitive discussions of several topics which will continue to challenge SSD and require ongoing attention, even if total solutions are not achievable. Although they are still applicable, we have not repeated or rephrased those accounts, but we recommend them to anyone interested in pursuing them. Specifically, the topics include the unique status of SSD (p. 15), the provision for partnership agreements between SSD and the partner districts (p. 18), the elusiveness of equity of services among the partner districts and disability categories (p. 19), the challenges of a massive and geographically far-flung district and staff like SSD (p. 21), the resolution of differences between the districts (p. 22), the crucial role and functioning of the Governing Council (p. 23), ensuring the least restrictive environment (p. 35), joint professional development (p. 35), and the role of SSD as advocate (p. 41). The report is available in the SSD central office.

Ongoing change and evolution will continue to touch the world of special education and SSD just as it does other institutions and endeavors. National trends in special education continue to move toward closer integration of special and regular education and to more shared responsibility for instruction. The identification and designation of disabilities and the most appropriate programs for them continue to be modified. The search for causes of autism and attention deficit disorder will continue. Response to intervention and early intervening services strategies look increasingly promising. Partner districts and the citizens of St. Louis County have a right to expect SSD to be a major contributor and leader in charting the course of these developments and movements and in delivering the results to children who need special and vocational services. We believe SSD is well positioned and seems positively inclined to be a pacesetter in meeting these challenges.

I. Issues and Concerns—Continuing Challenges

While the results of the scientific survey were consistently and overwhelmingly positive, we were also interested in exploring the reasons for the negative responses of 4-8 percent of respondents. The survey results do not quantify the reasons for these responses which no doubt range from taxes being too high to dissatisfaction with services. Statements at the public forums and those obtained through other initiatives, however, were almost exclusively from parents who were dissatisfied with services for their children. Their anecdotal statements of personal experiences recounted and movingly conveyed the frustrations, the anguish, the pleas for help, the deep and very real concerns which a small number of parents feel and have experienced. Their concerns range from almost total dissatisfaction with SSD services in several cases, to varying degrees of satisfaction but disappointment that more could not be, or is not being, done for their children.

It is surely not surprising that there would occasionally be serious disagreements with, and no doubt some failures in, an organization as large and complex as SSD—one with such an exceptionally sensitive and challenging mission which typically deals with the most basic and emotional needs of

families and their children. Although the SSD instructional staff is generally the most appreciated and highly commended component of the District, an occasional inadequate or incompetent staff member, for example, is inevitable. In those cases it is understandable that parents respond quite critically because their children are being shortchanged and not receiving the education they deserve. It appears that SSD is conscientious about dealing with these cases, but the process is sometimes more complicated and requires more time than one would like.

In fairness to the persons who took the time and made the effort to share their concerns with the PRC, and in order to maximize the value of the PRC's efforts, we devote a good portion of the remainder of this report to recording and examining those concerns. We are well aware that in cases like these there are often different and sometimes irreconcilable perspectives and opinions—some mistaken, some correct, most somewhere in between. The significance of the issue for the persons involved, nevertheless, is not diminished by determining who is “right” and who is “wrong.” An organizational dysfunction or miscommunication between staff and parents are additional examples of frustration and dissatisfaction from time to time. It should also be noted that these issues are sometimes inextricably intertwined with the partner districts' shared role. Further, although most of these issues will not be new to SSD, we recommend that the District reexamine them in the interest of striving to do an even better job and meeting the expectations of all parents. (These concerns are also summarized and included as Appendix A.)

The fact that we have chosen to include all minority views, even if expressed by only one person, while not detailing the highly positive overall view of SSD in the same manner, may seem to give inordinate space to and place undue emphasis on the negatives. Our expanded report, however, is intended to facilitate SSD's becoming an even more successful institution, and not to detract from the unequivocal “pass” given to SSD in this report.

II. Current Status, Concerns/Issues and Recommendations

We have formulated a brief statement about the current status of each item named in legislation, stated and quantified the number of various concerns, and made several related recommendations. SSD administration provided the Committee with a status report regarding the recommendations which the 2006 PRC made. We have included this report as Appendix C. and have not repeated the content of that report unless it involves an ongoing effort and relates to a continuing issue.

As indicated earlier, we have intended to acknowledge all concerns we heard as part of the documentation of our work, and for the benefit of SSD and partner districts. Consequently, the concerns:

1. May or may not be viewed as an issue by all, or even any, PRC members
2. May be important to and expressed and presented by only one party
3. May be equally an issue in other districts as well as in SSD
4. May relate to a joint SSD/partner district responsibility
5. May already be well known to SSD and have already been addressed or partially addressed by SSD, but not to the satisfaction of the respondents
6. May be a controversial matter on which not even the “experts” agree
7. May or may not be an actionable action
8. May or may not have led to a Recommendation by the PRC.

Since SSD is on top of its game, or mission shall we say, we have offered only a few recommendations. When we have done so, they are sometimes an endorsement of efforts underway and encouragement to continue the efforts. Some relate to the unique dual-district structure in St. Louis County and/or the SSD/Partner relationship. Some regard ongoing and long-term issues and will likely be repeated in successive PRC reports. Some can be solved, some can be alleviated, some will probably always be issues to some degree or another.

A. Structure

1. Current Status. The PRC has assumed that “Structure” was designated by the legislature as a subject for review because of the nearly unique, dual-district arrangement and relationship in St. Louis County. Further, at times in the past, the wisdom, feasibility and workability of this structure met with considerable question. At minimum, this unique structure is now accepted as “the way it is.” By implication, the exceptionally high approval rating accorded SSD in the survey effectively dismisses the existence of SSD as a significant source of issues and debate and suggests that it is “the way we want it” since 91 percent of respondents believe that SSD has an important mission and 27 percent believe that services are better now than five years ago.

It is generally accepted and assumed that SSD and partner districts must share responsibility for delivering special services as seamlessly as possible—as though the two districts were one—but that the partner districts have ultimate responsibility for all their students. Efforts are now primarily focused on maximizing the effectiveness and resources of the SSD and partner districts. Some of the concerns acknowledged in later sections, such as difficulty of access, could possibly be related to the SSD structure, but since they might also occur in districts outside St. Louis County who administer their own special education programs, we have not included them in this section.

2. Issues/Concerns. Several parents reported their own or secondhand instances of perceived inequity of services.

3. Recommendation – Structure.

- a. We commend SSD for pursuing the difficult challenge of defining a standard of equity in order to ensure greater consistency among partner districts and disability groups, and recommend that the effort be vigorously continued in conjunction with partner districts.*

B. Governance

1. Current Status. The average tenure and educational experience of current SSD Board members are comparatively high. The Board functions efficiently, effectively and appropriately. Nobody testified against the manner in which Board members are selected; however, not everyone agrees with it. Sixty-eight percent of the general public agree; 24 percent disagree, the same ratio as in 2006.

The unique Governing Council is responsible for electing the SSD Board of Education and approving the annual budget and the rolling plans. The Council enables key representation

and involvement by the partner districts and provides a check and balance to the SSD Board as it performs its limited but crucial roles. Both the Board and the Council exhibit respect for each other and their roles. The governance structure is functioning satisfactorily, and apparently increasingly so.

2. Issues/Concerns.

a. Governing Council Performance. Concerns about the Governing Council in 2006 continue to be concerns and probably always will be because of the inherent nature of the Council. While its membership still includes several charter members, the membership tends to turn over more rapidly than desirable for maximum efficiency. Since the Council does not meet often, it is unrealistic to expect the newest members to become well informed about the SSD budget which the Council must approve. Council members did, however, express satisfaction with the helpful information they receive from the SSD administration and the fact that alternates as well as primary Council members receive complete information.

Average attendance at meetings has continued to improve steadily although a small number of districts appear not to be adequately represented. We had indication that many members do an excellent job of keeping their fellow Board members well informed about Council proceedings and SSD operations; however, it also appears that a small number of members do not do so.

Notwithstanding these concerns, old-timers will remember that the initial Governing Council asserted and demonstrated the potentially powerful role of the Council by making exceptionally difficult decisions which probably literally saved SSD. The Council is in effect responsible for ensuring the integrity of SSD and has the authority to do so. It is crucial that it maintain a high level of viability not only to meet its limited but very important ongoing responsibilities, but also to be prepared to address any unusual issues that might emerge in the future.

b. Governing Council/Parent Advisory Council (PAC) Relationship. It seems clear that the Missouri Legislature envisioned an important role for both the Governing Council and the SSD PAC, although the one is decision-making, the other advisory. To quote RSMo 162.858.2, the PAC “shall consult with the governing council and the board of education on issues involving pupils or parents of pupils of the district, including procedures for parental rights in resolution conferences and other proceedings regarding disputes between a parent and the local school district, the special school district or both, over the education of a pupil.”

We sensed considerable frustration on the part of both the PAC and the Council, since this provision is obviously difficult to implement. The intention seems to be that the PAC should take issues and concerns to the Council for resolution. PAC issues, however, are often so specific in nature, sometimes applying to a single family, that the Council is unable to and not the proper body to resolve the concern. The result is that there is effectively no working relationship between the Council and the PAC at this time. The PAC consequently feels that its intended role is not functioning as effectively as it should. It also appears that partner district PACs vary widely, ranging

from virtual non-existence to active membership and meaningful involvement. One representative, for example, reports regularly to her Board of Education. Circumstances and issues regarding the PAC/Governing Council relationship seem essentially the same as in 2006. They are also examined at length in that report.

3. Recommendations – Governance. Except for *d.* below, the following recommendations, included in the 2006 report, have been, or are being, satisfactorily addressed. They are being repeated because they require ongoing rather than one-time actions.

- a. That the Governing Council continue an intensive orientation process for its new members and alternates, including but not limited to review of the legislated responsibilities of Council members, familiarization with SSD special and vocational services, the General Assurance Document, delivery of services, IDEA requirements, and the importance of keeping one's own Board well informed.*
- b. That the SSD Board and Governing Council jointly and annually convey to partner Boards the crucial importance of each district being actively and regularly represented on the Governing Council and insist that districts appoint alternate representatives so that they can be represented at virtually all meetings.*
- c. That the process for filing for SSD Board membership be aggressively publicized annually for the purposes of informing the electorate of the process, making the process public, and enlisting candidates for the Board of Education.*
- d. That the PAC and SSD Superintendent/designee, with the approval of the Governing Council, jointly explore a revision of procedures by which the PAC could pursue its concerns through an established administrative channel(s) in order to get more satisfactory responses, with the Governing Council and SSD Board being informed periodically of the results.*

C. Administration

1. Current Status. In 2008 the SSD Board hired a highly experienced Superintendent of Schools who is generally held in high esteem and given high marks for his leadership and commitment, as well as his responsiveness to partner districts. Only 4% of SSD staff have a negative view of the Superintendent. He succeeded a Superintendent who was also credited with having done an exceptionally outstanding job. SSD administrators at the partner district level scored well, but not as well, with a 19 percent disapproval rating. Consequently, we conclude that administration of the district is functioning satisfactorily.

2. Issues/Concerns.

- a. Administrator accountability and ratio.* One person alleged that SSD administrators working with the partner districts are not accountable to anyone and that the number of administrators is increasing (the latter is quantifiably not the case).
- b. Working Relationships between SSD and Partner District Administrators.* The same person alleged that partner districts have no control over what SSD

administrators are assigned to them. The record, however, indicates that partner district involvement in the assignment of staff may be a part of partnership agreements and that partner districts are generally involved to the extent that they choose to be.

3. Recommendations – Administration

- a. We commend SSD for working with the Baldrige model which concentrates on a process of continuous improvement and making data-driven and research-based decisions, and we recommend that it be continued and fully implemented. As a part of the improvement process, we further recommend that SSD utilize this report as a data source. Similarly, we recommend that SSD continue to involve partner districts in the development of the SSD Comprehensive School Improvement Plan.*

D. Financial Management

1. Current Status. SSD’s fiscal management continues to be competent, transparent and highly prudent, with the maintenance of responsible fund balances. By approximately a 2:1 ratio, the same ratio by which a tax levy was approved in 2006, the general public indicated that their tax dollars are being spent effectively by SSD.

2. Issues/Concerns. None.

3. Recommendations – Financial Management. None.

E. Delivery of Services

1. Current Status. The delivery of special and vocational education to the youth of St. Louis County is SSD’s primary responsibility and reason for being. The parent and general public survey responses regarding delivery of services were highly favorable. The public rating was 3.02 vs. 2.89 in 2006, a statistically significant improvement. Parents of children receiving services rate services higher at 3.46 vs. 3.39 in 2006. Twenty-seven percent of respondents believe services are better now than five years ago.

Asked about a number of questions concerning their children’s teachers, parents gave the highest ratings (94 percent) to “My child’s needs are assessed well,” Teachers make accommodations and modifications as called for,” and “Teachers have high expectations for my child.” Lowest ratings, but still high, were given to “My child’s IEP adequately considers placement options (86 percent) and “Grade transitions are handled appropriately” (3.25). However, as indicated earlier, there are concerns with negative responses ranging from 4 to 8 percent on the survey, and as characterized specifically by persons who addressed the PRC and as reported below. Most of the concerns expressed fall under this category—Delivery of Services.

2. Issues/Concerns

- a. Paperwork.* There is too much! So goes the most common and continuing complaint from the instructional staff. There is no doubt that record keeping takes a

considerable amount of valuable time away from working directly with students. Some believe that SSD paperwork exceeds requirements; many believe that burdensome paperwork is an inescapable dimension of special education, which requires meticulous documentation of assessments and measures, academic and behavioral goals, accommodations, and progress, stated in language that all can understand. It is not clear to us that paperwork is any more of a problem in St. Louis County than in other districts throughout the country.

b. Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Since it is the vehicle which dictates, controls and assesses all special services, the universal and sometimes subjective IEP process is one of the most frequent causes of parent complaint. Implementation of the IEP process is a demanding and crucial task. The intensity of concerns is great, and dealing with the IEP is a frustrating experience for some parents. Survey results, however, were negative in only 4-8 percent of the responses. A few parents presented concerns in person at forums or meetings. The specific concerns, and number of persons voicing them, were as follows:

- Incomplete information provided to parents (less than staff members have) (When asked, several other persons agreed with this concern.) 3
- Some IEPs are not accurate. 2
- Takes too long to get IEP conference scheduled (four months in one case). 2
- Some of child's teachers don't know about the child's IEP. (When asked, several other persons present agreed.) 2
- IEP not followed faithfully. 2
- IEP changed without parent being present or invited to conference. 1
- Parents should receive an agenda prior to the IEP conference. 1

c. Curriculum and Instruction. Several curriculum concerns were presented, as noted below.

- More joint staff development for SSD and partner district staff is needed. 2
- Services for autistic child adequate at elementary and middle levels, but concerned they will not be satisfactory at the high school level. 2
- Reading program was inappropriate for my child. 2
- Support for transition between pre-school to elementary, elementary to middle, and middle to high school is inadequate. 2
- Need better transition provision for life skills and between school levels. 1
- SSD staff need more training for working with severely disabled students. 1
- Need more "social justice" training for teachers. 1
- Need middle school self-contained rooms. 1
- Children don't receive enough training in social skills. 1
- Curriculum is not sufficiently and appropriately modified. 1
- Paraprofessionals are not permitted to talk to parents. 1
- Heard that services not consistent from district to district. 1
- Children with moderate disabilities not served as well as those with severe or mild disabilities. 1

The 2006 report contains a rather definitive discussion of curriculum issues which we recommend to anyone who is interested in additional discussion of curriculum matters.

d. Placement. Disagreement with the placement of students by SSD was the most frequently expressed concern.

- Placement was too restrictive (although in one case the student was happier in the more restrictive placement, according to the grandparent). 5
- Testing sometimes results in inaccurate diagnoses and placement. 2

The issues/concerns presented above in the Delivery of Services section are few in number but they often constitute monumental and consuming frustrations and dilemmas in the lives of the parents who expressed and experience them. They are issues for which there may be no answers acceptable to all parties. Most likely, parents are right in some cases and the school(s) are right in some cases. Even more likely in most cases, there is no clear right and wrong, but both parties stand on what they firmly believe is right. It would be presumptuous of us to claim to have definitive solutions to these dilemmas. We encourage SSD to continue to pursue and embrace the concept of continuous improvement, to incorporate the concept into the culture of the District, and never to relent in its commitment to meet the needs of all children.

3. Recommendations – Delivery of Services

- a. Since there are still some serious disagreements between parents and SSD, we are retaining a previous recommendation that SSD consider expanding the role of the Parent Resource Center to include resources to informally mediate differences between parents and district staff in the education of their child with a disability. Such a service would be optional for parents and would not serve to delay their access to formal mediation or due process required under IDEA. Rather, such mediation would serve to strengthen the relationship between parties and to concentrate on child focused solutions.*
- b. While we do not profess to have definitive solutions to the above dilemmas, we encourage SSD to continue to pursue the concept of continuous improvement and never to relent in its commitment to meet the needs of all children*

F. Cooperation with Component School Districts

1. Current Status. The expectation that component districts and SSD will cooperate in the delivery of services, and that they share a joint responsibility for doing so, now seems undisputed. When one considers the complexity of the dynamics between SSD and each partner district, and the accompanying infinite possibilities for disagreement, it is quite remarkable that cooperation is as harmonious as it appears to be. When the occasional complaint arises, the duo of districts seems willing to share responsibility rather than trying to pass the blame to the other. There are some logistical difficulties in matters such as synchronizing schedules to facilitate collaboration, accommodating space needs, and communicating readily, but the districts seem committed to resolving those issues rather than complaining about them. We heard no significant concerns regarding cooperation between SSD and its partner districts.

Partnership agreements developed between SSD and partner districts enable them to execute a more unified effort and to maximize efficiency. Examples are sharing the employment of liaison administrators, assumption of early childhood special education by a partner district with flow-through funding, tailored agreements for space requirements, shared transportation, cooperating in the selection of staff, and shared responsibility for staff development.

2. **Issues/Concerns.** None.

3. **Recommendations – Cooperation with Component School Districts.** None.

G. Role as an advocate for handicapped and severely handicapped children (as stated in 162.858, RSMo)

1. **Current Status.** Advocacy is an inherent part of SSD’s mission to provide services to students with disabilities. The SSD Board is committed to the purposes for which SSD exists. SSD’s advocacy role begins when it seeks the funds necessary to fulfill its mission—such as seeking an increase in its tax levy or lobbying for additional state and federal funding. SSD advocates strongly for comparable space, equipment and materials in partner district settings.

Several other factors suggest advocacy on SSD’s part. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reports that the incidence of Due Process and Child Complaint cases in St. Louis County is consistent with other comparable areas and for the state of Missouri. Only seven percent of respondents on the parent survey said parents are not well informed about their rights. Finally, the percent of students identified with disabilities and receiving services in St. Louis County has historically been slightly higher than the state and national averages.

2. **Issues/Concerns**

a. **Obtaining Services.** One of the most recurring concerns, stated in six cases and agreed to by several others present, is the difficulty of obtaining services. These persons view the process as adversarial, bureaucratic, slow and requiring an inordinate amount of parent initiative. Instead of being an advocate for children at the referral stage and being open to providing services, the perception is that SSD unduly resists providing services, that the process is too contentious, too much of a hassle. Three persons believe they are labeled as “troublemakers” anytime they disagree with SSD.

3. **Recommendations—Role as an advocate for handicapped and severely handicapped children**

a. *Continue to encourage parents to take advantage of SSD’s excellent support resources for parents, both material and personnel.*

H. Compliance with Sections 162.850 to 162.859, RSMo, regarding conflicts and responsiveness to the needs and concerns of the citizens of the Special School District.

1. Current Status. (Some of the concerns included under other categories, particularly Section VII, could also be included in this section.) Survey results indicate that SSD is generally responsive to the needs and concerns of the citizens. Only six percent of respondents on the parent survey indicated that SSD does not work cooperatively with parents. Twenty-three percent indicated that it is not “easy to contact the right SSD person to deal with a concern.” All agencies from whom SSD has purchased services, or with whom SSD may have worked in recent years, were invited to express concerns. No agencies responded.

If “citizens” refers to non-parents, we heard essentially no concerns. Survey results were highly positive as reported in earlier sections of this report. A small percentage of parents, however, have intense unresolved concerns which have resulted in “conflicts” with and charges of lack of “responsiveness” from SSD, as identified in Section VII, Delivery of Services.

2. Issues/Concerns. Instances of conflicts and lack of responsiveness by SSD were reported as follows.

- Communication with parents is insufficient, i.e., don’t know when a child qualifies for services, what services are available, how to prepare for IEP conferences, when to request reevaluations, etc. **4**
- SSD refused to provide full time paraprofessional for child. **2**
- Feels disregarded; doesn’t know whom to speak to, too departmentalized. **2**
- Put child in private school because SSD didn’t offer full services. **1**
- Notes to parents when student has had surgery and medical procedures are insensitive and threatening. **1**
- Parent was hot-lined by SSD for inappropriate behavior at school but parent was unaware of a problem. **1**

3. Recommendations – Compliance. None.

I. Vocational Education

1. Current Status. The Missouri Statute does not mandate the PRC to include vocational education in its review because, at the time the statute was written, the responsibility for conducting vocational education was being reassigned to another body. The courts subsequently disallowed this decision and remanded back to SSD the responsibility for conducting vocational education. Consequently, the PRC included vocational education on its survey and met with staff responsible for vocational education.

Overall responses regarding vocational education registered a strong 3.51 on the 4 point scale. Facilities and knowledgeable staff received the highest marks (3.58 and 3.56 respectively) and job placement and post-secondary placement the lowest (3.03 and 3.30). The largest concerns, although expressed by less than six percent of respondents, were whether students will be prepared for a job and transportation services available to students.

Enrollment is stable and a comprehensive range of offerings is available to both part time and full time students. As with special education responses, the more familiar the respondents

were with vocational education, the more positive their responses. Nobody expressed a concern in person regarding the vocational schools. The vocational program appears to be serving its clientele well.

2. Issues/Concerns

a. North Tech versus South Tech. South County Technical School received somewhat higher scores on survey items than North County did. What accounts for this difference, and whether or not it is significant, is not clear to the PRC.

3. Recommendation – Vocational Education

a. That SSD examine the differences between the responses to the South and North County schools, attempt to identify the reasons for the differences, determine whether the differences are significant and, if so, initiate steps to address the differences.

Acknowledgements

Even during SSD's years of turmoil, the instructional and professional staff generally received high marks from their constituencies. Our study and survey results indicate that the teachers and other professional staff members (with the typical number of exceptions) may be even more appreciated by the thousands of families whom they serve than they were in 2006. We do not want this high tribute to be obscured by the nature of the PRC's primary charge which is to determine whether there are unusual problems with SSD.

The PRC is also appreciative of the complete cooperation and tangible support it received from SSD Superintendent John Cary and the administrative staff. They patiently, willingly and promptly responded to our time consuming requests. We also relied heavily on Rita Boughan who produced an accurate record and documentation of our work and provided whatever secretarial assistance the Committee needed. Our job was also made easier by the SSD Board of Education agreeing to fund the independent survey conducted by Dr. Jones, and thereby opening itself up to public scrutiny and accountability through the instrument of an objective outside party. The PRC appreciates the historical information provided by Dr. Max Wolfrum regarding the SSD, the PRC and Section 162.858, Revised Statutes of Missouri as well as his editorial assistance with this report. Finally, we appreciate the special efforts of PRC member Dr. Paul Doerrer in compiling this report of the Committee's activities.

Summary of Recommendations

I. Structure

a. We commend SSD for pursuing the difficult challenge of defining a standard of equity in order to ensure greater consistency among partner districts and disability groups, and recommend that the effort be vigorously continued in conjunction with partner districts.

II. Governance

- a. That the Governing Council continue an intensive orientation process for its new members and alternates, including but not limited to review of the legislated responsibilities of Council members, familiarization with SSD special and vocational services, the General Assurance Document, delivery of services, IDEA requirements, and the importance of keeping one's own Board well informed.*
- b. That the SSD Board and Governing Council jointly and annually convey to partner boards the crucial importance of each district being actively and regularly represented on the Governing Council and insist that districts appoint alternate representatives so that they can be represented at virtually all meetings.*
- c. That the process for filing for SSD Board membership be aggressively publicized annually for the purposes of informing the electorate of the process, making the process public, and enlisting candidates for the Board of Education.*
- d. That the PAC and SSD Superintendent/designee, with the approval of the Governing Council, jointly explore a revision of procedures by which the PAC could pursue its concerns through an established administrative channel(s) in order to get more satisfactory responses, with the Governing Council and SSD Board being informed periodically of the results.*

III. Administration

- a. We commend SSD for working with the Baldrige model which concentrates on a process of continuous improvement and making data-driven and research-based decisions, and we recommend that it be continued and fully implemented. As a part of the improvement process, we further recommend that SSD use this report as a data source. Similarly, we recommend that SSD continue to involve partner districts in the development of the SSD Comprehensive School Improvement Plan.*

IV. Financial Management - None.

V. Delivery of Services

- a. Since there still are some serious disagreements between parents and SSD, we are retaining a previous recommendation that SSD consider expanding the role of the Parent Resource Center to include resources to informally mediate differences between parents and district staff in the education of their child with a disability. Such a service would be optional for parents and would not serve to delay their access to formal mediation or due process required under IDEA. Rather, such mediation would serve to strengthen the relationship between parties and to concentrate on child focused solutions.*
- b. While we do not profess to have definitive solutions to the above dilemmas, we encourage SSD to continue to pursue the concept of continuous improvement and never to relent in its commitment to meet the needs of all children*

VI. Cooperation with Component School Districts - None

VII. Role as an Advocate for Handicapped Children

- a. Continue to encourage parents to make use of SSD's excellent support resources for parents, both material and personnel.*

VIII. Compliance . . . - None.

IX. Vocational Education

- a. That SSD examine the differences between the responses to the South and North County schools, attempt to identify the reasons for the differences, determine whether the differences are significant and, if so, initiate steps to address the differences.*

Adoption of Report

This Report adopted this 16th day of June, 2010

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS
of
The Public Review Committee of Special School District**

John Heskett, Chair

Lynn Beckwith, Jr.

Mary Oswald

Satonya Booker, Vice Chair

Paul Doerrer

Eleanor Perkins

George R. Albin, III

Ron Kuschel

Donnell Probst

APPENDICES:

- A. Summary of Concerns Presented to the PRC
- B. Results of Survey Conducted by Dr. Jones
- C. Responses to and Status of 2006 Recommendations
- D. Meetings Schedule

File Documentation (stored in and available for inspection at the office of the SSD Board of Education:

1. Minutes of Regular Meetings
 - November 18, 2009 (informal)
 - December 9, 2009
 - January 13, 2010
 - January 27, 2010
 - February 3, 2010
 - March 3, 2010
 - April 7, 2010
 - May 5, 2010
 - May 26, 2010
 - June 16, 2010
2. Minutes of General Public Forums
 - January 21, 2010
 - January 28, 2010
 - February 4, 2010
 - March 24, 2010
3. Summaries of Meetings with
 - Parent Advisory Council – February 17, 2010
 - SSD Board of Education – February 23, 2010
 - SSD Governing Council – March 8, 2010
 - Career Technical Education Committee – March 31, 2010
4. Survey Results – General Public, Parents of SSD and Career Technical Education Committee
5. Survey Results – SSD Staff – June 2009
6. Public Review Committee Report of 2006

The following documents are available from Special School District upon request.

1. SSD Budget FY 2010
2. SSD Independent Audit
3. SSD Five Year Rolling Plan, FY 2010-FY 2014
4. Results of surveys conducted by SSD
5. MSIP Advanced Questionnaire Parent Report for SSD
6. MSIP Final Report
7. Program Evaluations presented to the SSD Board of Education and reviewed by the PRC