

Changes will affect 150 initially, will reduce transitions later, district says

Special ed

Alpine School District 2024 special class feeder pattern

"Please — don't," Smith repeated.

This fall, Utah's largest school district will implement a new "consolidated" special education class structure, which will force roughly 150 special education students in grades K-6 to transfer to different schools.

When districts restructure, close schools or open new ones, it can be hard for students to adjust. But those changes can be particularly difficult for children with special needs, parents said.

"My child, he needs to be in an environment that's consistent," parent Remi Forrest told board members. Forrest started a petition on Change.org in opposition to the planned restructuring. By Monday afternoon, it had amassed over 2,500 signatures. "I don't think there's any other marginalized minority that would be based out of their community school to make room for general education," Forrest said, adding that her son has already changed schools five times in the last two years.

But Alpine school officials say that's exactly why they're making the change — to reduce the number of times students switch schools at the elementary level. The move also comes as the district prepares to transition to all-day kindergarten in the 2024-25 school year.

The current structure, said Rich Stowell, district communications director, is making families switch schools too often. "The goal of the plan is to minimize transitions."

WHAT'S CHANGING?

There are around 10,000 students within the Alpine School District who have what's called an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, Stowell said. An IEP is like a personalized road map that lays out educational goals, support services, special accommodations and how to monitor progress for students with disabilities.

"[An IEP] is inviolate," said Stowell, meaning that a student is entitled to any special classes or services outlined in their plan.

A "special class" is a classroom specifically designed and structured to meet the unique academic, behavioral and developmental needs of a student with disabilities.

Not all students with an IEP require a special class. Stowell estimates there are about 800 students at the district who need special classes. However, those classes may or may not be available at a student's neighborhood school. Often, students must be bused to different schools where they are offered.

Stowell explained that due to the relatively small number of students requiring special classes, and limited funding, it's not feasible to offer such classes at every elementary school

	Special Class	Autism	Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities
			EBD
Cedar Valley Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Cedar Valley, Eagle Valley, Mountain Trails	Black Ridge (K-1) Eagle Valley (2-6)	Mountain Trails (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Black Ridge	Black Ridge (K-1) Brookhaven (2-6)	Mountain Trails (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Brookhaven	Brookhaven (K-6)	Harbor Point (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Desert Sky, Hidden Hollow	Hidden Hollow (K-6)	Mountain Trails (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Pony Express	Pony Express (K-6)	Thunder Ridge (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Westlake Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Harbor Point, Sage Hills, Saratoga Shores, Springdale	Saratoga Shores (K-1) Sage Hills (2-6)	Harbor Point (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Riverview, Silver Lake, Thunder Ridge	Riverview (K-1) Silver Lake (2-6)	Thunder Ridge (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Harvest	Liberty Hills (K-6)	Thunder Ridge (K-6)	Springside (1-6)
Lehi Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Dry Creek, Lehi, Meadow, North Point, River Rock, Snow Springs	Snow Springs (K-6)	Lehi (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Skyline Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Eaglecrest, Fox Hollow, Sego Lilly	Fox Hollow (K-6)	Eaglecrest (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Belmont, Traverse Mountain	Fox Hollow (K-6)	Belmont (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Liberty Hills	Liberty Hills (K-6)	Lehi (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Freedom	Highland (K-6)	Eaglecrest (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Lone Peak Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Alpine, Cedar Ridge, Deerfield	Cedar Ridge (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Highland	Highland (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Ridgeline	Highland (K-6)	Belmont (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Westfield	Cedar Ridge (K-6)	Belmont (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
American Fork Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Barratt, Forbes, Shelley	Shelley (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Greenwood	Greenwood (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Legacy	Highland (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Timpagages Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Aspen, Bonneville, Northridge, Windsor	Rocky Mountain (K-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Orem Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Cascade, Foothill	Centennial (K) Cascade (1-6)	Foothill (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Centennial	Centennial (K-6)	Foothill (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Orchard	Rocky Mountain (K-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Pleasant Grove Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Centennial	Manila (K) Central (1-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Grovecrest	Manila (K) Grovecrest (1-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Manila	Manila (K-6)	Forbes (K-6)	Meadow (1-6)
Mount Mahogany	Manila (K-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
London, Rocky Mountain	Rocky Mountain (K-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Mountain View Cluster Schools	Special Class	Autism	EBD
Westmore, Cherry Hill	Centennial (K) Westmore (1-6)	Foothill (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Orem, Parkside	Centennial (K-6)	Foothill (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)
Trailside, Vineyard	Trailside (K-6)	Northridge (K-6)	Aspen (1-6)

Source: Alpine School District

— a problem that's not unique to Alpine.

He noted that the shortage of resources puts pressure on districts as they strive to deliver an "appropriate" education for every student, while also responsibly managing finite resources.

Currently, the district offers special classes at about half of its 90 schools, and there are six program types, catering to certain special education needs while also addressing the specific requirements of students with mild-to-moderate learning disabilities, autism, or emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD).

By fall, those six programs will merge into three: Special

Class, Autism and EBD. The consolidation will initially disrupt the school feeder pattern for about 150 special class students, but Stowell said it will ultimately result in fewer transitions later on.

"At the moment that the new plan takes effect, some families will be caught on one side or the other," Stowell said. "We know that it's problematic for those families. But we also know that it's in the best interest of our students."

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Nate Crippes, an attorney

with Utah's Disability Law Center, intended to speak at the same Alpine School Board meeting where parents like Smith and Forrest spoke — until he was told he couldn't, because he doesn't live within the Alpine School District.

Had Crippes been allowed to speak, he said he would have called the planned reconfiguration a "scheme" that he asserts violates federal law. Specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, in that the consolidation may further isolate students with disabilities from general education students.

To prevent discrimination, federal law requires public entities to administer services to individuals with disabilities "in the most integrated setting appropriate."

"The goal should be to serve students in integrated settings," Crippes told The Tribune. "And as much as possible, spend time in the general education classroom."

But Alpine officials say the district's special education programs and its planned restructuring are compliant with federal law.

"Adjustments to our special classes improve the continuity and efficacy of our special education programs," the district said in a statement. "We follow principles of meaningful inclusion with a goal to cultivate learning environments where every student feels valued and supported."

Crippes said the new configuration sends students with disabilities to specific classrooms when the district should instead be trying to find ways to offer services to those students within a general education setting.

"Essentially, the reason students are being moved and their placement is being changed is not because of some individualized assessment or need for these students," Crippes said.

"It's just a unilateral decision," he argued, that amounts to discrimination, because a student would be assigned to a particular school solely based on their disability, rather than what's outlined as what's best for them in their IEP.

All of our special education program offerings meet federal and state law requirements and are in the best interest of students," the district's statement continued. "Students with IEPs are provided the support the IEP team has identified in an environment that allows opportunities for integration equal to that of students without IEPs and meets the educational needs identified by the IEP team."

The Disability Law Center previously sued the Salt Lake City School District over a similar reorganization.

According to the 2021 complaint, Salt Lake City education leaders in 2019 made the decision to consolidate the district's special education class system into "hubs," forcing student plaintiffs to relocate outside of their neighborhood schools.

The complaint alleged that the Salt Lake City School District discriminates against students with disabilities, that it has a history of such discrimination; and that the "hubs" fail to "adequately serve" plaintiffs and other students with disabilities.

The lawsuit was ultimately dismissed in March upon the district's request. The Disability Law Center has since appealed the decision, Crippes said.

Crippes said he expects comment on whether the Disability Law Center would pursue similar litigation against Alpine, noting that the Salt Lake City appeal "will be instructive on how we proceed."

STEWART FROM ALPINE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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