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Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance

By Stacy Andell

The Orange County Schools ' Special Education Alliance was created by the 28 districts in Orange

County in 2003. The primary goal of the Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance is to meet the need for a countywide system that can focus on special education. This includes offering staff development and training to school employees, creating leadership in advocating for legislative and administrative change, overseeing the decisions and rulings rendered by administrative agencies, offering a way to fund the litigation and appeals of administrative and judicial decisions and rulings especially when the outcome has a countywide significance or precedent setting in its implications for all students.

The Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance was created with the intention of addressing all the concerns of all students regardless of if the student has any manner disability. Any student that is not receiving the full services they need changed because of lack of funding to support mandates created under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The main problem that Orange County Schools faces with meeting this federal mandate is drawing funds from the regular education program. Funds are often taken from the regular education program to support the needs of special education students. Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance aims to provide the services all students need to be successful in meeting academic standards.

Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance plans to accomplish this goal by providing staff development to its practitioners, use the legislative process to seek adequate funding to provide these high quality services, and when necessary, support litigation to achieve these goals. Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance also encourages staff members, parents, advocates and organizations to get involved by using their voices and contact the local officials and hold them accountable for promises and mandates for which regular education and special needs children are entitled.

Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance is lead by an Executive Committee that is composed of Superintendents from different school districts across Orange County. The actual carrying out of the goals is the responsibility of the Review Committee. The Review Committee is comprised of five Superintendents regionally nominated, Orange County Schools' legal counsel, two

private attorneys representing school districts in special education matters, two SELPA directors, and one business administrator. The Review Committee has been working hard for the past two years in order to try and meet the goals of the Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance. Even though the focus of the Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance is in the areas of legal and funding, it tries hard to work closely with teachers and staff members so that its members are informed about the needs of the schools at root levels.

Since the Orange County Schools' Special Education Alliance was created it has accomplish a great deal to meet the needs of the school districts across Orange County.

Stacy Andell is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on Orange County schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/california/orange–county/index.html>

Two Orlando Schools In Trouble With State Board Of Education

By Patricia Hawke

Two Orlando schools are in trouble with the State Board of Education. Both Evans and Jones High Schools have repeatedly failed the state's annual school grading system that is based on student scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Evans has received three Fs and five Ds over the past eight years, while Jones has been scored with five consecutive Fs since 2002. A grade of F means these two Orlando schools have high numbers of students who perform far below grade level in reading and math.

These two Orlando schools, plus five other schools in Miami–Dade, Duval and Jefferson districts, faced dramatic overhauls by state mandate. In July, the state threatened sanctions against the four districts. The districts did not draft bold enough strategies for school reform, which prompted revisions from Duval and Jefferson that were accepted by the state in August. Miami–Dade and Orange (which governs the Orlando schools) plans were not accepted by the state, with both districts arguing the issue of who can run chronic–F schools in Florida.

The state wanted new principals hired at the two Orlando schools, who had track records of raising a school's grade by more than two levels (from a D to an A, or an F to a B grade). Orange Superintendent Ron Blocker believed such a move would destabilize the already fragile Orlando schools and argued that the state's pool of qualified leaders was too small to locate new principals with such successes.

The state reacted by penalizing the Orange County School District by reducing its August funding by slightly more than \$17,500, the equivalent of Blocker's monthly pay and benefit costs. They additionally barred the district from applying for some grants that are considered "extra funding" by the state, such as technology grants that would not directly impact the students. The lost grants could potentially cost Orange, the 12th largest school district in the nation, millions in grant dollars. This is the toughest move the state has even made to force change within one of its school districts.

In mid–September, the state education officials and Blocker came to an agreement that will help the district comply with the state's 26–point reform strategy for the two high–poverty, high–minority Orlando schools. The state has lifted the potentially costly penalties against the district and will return the August deducted penalties to the district within the month. State Education Commissioner John Winn stated that the penalties were a symbolic move to show the district that the state was serious in reforming the two Orlando schools.

Additionally, the principals at the two Orlando schools will continue in their positions. Karen Wilson has been principal at Evans High School since 2004. Bridget Williams became principal at Jones High School in 2006, after pushing Robinswood Middle School from a C to a B, then to an A during her transition to Jones. Robinswood also is a high–poverty, high–minority school. Both Orlando schools principals will be paired with state–approved mentors.

Winn stated that he expects the State Board of Education to approve the agreement and reform plans for the two Orlando schools by the end of September.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. For more information on Orlando schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/Florida/Orlando/index.html>



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