*Welcome to LLA Reports, a podcast produced by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor’s office. This podcast is intended to be an oral representation of the written report it highlights and is primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature.*

This is Kristen Jacobs. I’m a senior auditor for LLA’s Performance Audit Services. This episode of LLA Reports focuses on our new report titled “Louisiana Schools for the Deaf and Visually Impaired.”

The purpose of this report was to evaluate the Special School District’s – or SSD’s – oversight of the Louisiana Schools for the Deaf and Visually Impaired, or LSDVI. We conducted this audit in response to a legislative request.

SSD became a stand-alone educational service agency overseen by a board of directors in July 2021. State law mandates that SSD provide educational services to children living in Louisiana who are sensory impaired or have exceptionalities.

Before 2009, the state operated two separate schools in Baton Rouge for children with sensory impairments or exceptionalities – the Louisiana School for the Deaf and the Louisiana School for the Visually Impaired. The schools were merged onto one campus in Baton Rouge in 2009.

In addition, SSD also oversees the Special Schools Programs, which provide educational services to children in criminal justice facilities and state mental health facilities across the state.

We found that SSD needs to address issues within its organizational culture, including restoring trust in leadership, improving employee morale, increasing transparency, and communicating clearly with staff.

According toa survey we conducted, 76.6 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that morale is high within SSD, while 81.3 percent listed employee morale as one of SSD’s biggest challenges.

We also found that SSD faces staffing difficulties as a result of organizational changes, turnover, vacancies, and inconsistencies in performance evaluations and pay raises.

As of January 12, 2023, SSDhad 10 more full-time positions overall than it did as of July 1, 2021; however, ithad fewer teacher and direct service positions and more administrativepositions.

We found as well that during fiscal years 2021 through 2023, SSD did not resolve all grievance complaints, and that it lacked a process to track grievances.In addition, staff expressed concern through our survey and interviews that they would face retaliation for filing a grievance. Of the 14 individuals who filed grievances between 2021 and 2023, eight resigned and one was terminated.

Since SSD became a stand-alone agency, it has not developed comprehensive policies and procedures for the district or schools. In fact, we found it has developed only four policies: an Americans with Disabilities Act policy, a grievance policy, a telework policy, and a video monitoring of school property policy.

Additionally, we found that the SSD Board needs orientation and ongoing training about their roles and responsibilities, meeting procedures, and SSD operations, in order to better do its job.

We found, too, that SSD needs to strengthen its philosophy of deaf education and improve staff credentials at the Louisiana School for the Deaf. For example, the school does not have a clear implementation plan for its American Sign Language/English bilingual philosophy, and staff do not always meet American Sign Language proficiency requirements as outlined in their job descriptions.

We also found that during fiscal years 2021 through 2023, SSD did not always provide speech therapy services as outlined in student Individual Education Programs.In our sample of30 students, 20 did not receive any speech language pathology services infiscal year 2023. SSD said it could not provide all speech pathology services because two of the three speech therapist positions were vacant.

In addition, during fiscal year 2022, SSD did not spend $747,000 dollars of $2.1 million dollars in federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, funds available for its use. As of April 2023, SSD also had not spent $788,000 dollars of its $1.5-million-dollar budget for fiscal year 2023.

As a result of our report, we developed 19 recommendations.

Four of the recommendations were related to improving employee morale and staffing levels, while three of the recommendations focused on SSD’s grievance process and the lack of policies and procedures, and two recommendations suggested ways to strengthen the board of directors’ oversight role.

Another five recommendations dealt with improving staff proficiency with American Sign Language and encouraging School for the Deaf teachers to earn their hearing-impaired certificates.

Four other recommendations were related to hiring a speech language pathologist and ensuring students receive speech therapy services.

Finally, we recommended that SSD identify the best ways to spend IDEA funds each year and spend them accordingly to improve school services.

As part of its response, which is included in the report as Appendix A, the SSD agreed with all 17 recommendations that pertained to it, while the board agreed with the two recommendations related to it.

*We hope you found this podcast informative, and that you’ll follow future episodes of LLA Reports.*

*This podcast was created as part of the audit report just discussed and is intended primarily for the use of the Louisiana Legislature. Both the full report and the podcast can be found on the LLA’s website at* [*www.lla.la.gov*](http://www.lla.la.gov)*.*

*Thank you for listening.*