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## Aberdeen schools prepare to upgrade special education offerings

LOUIS KRAUSS ([HTTP://WWW.THEDAILYWORLD.COM/AUTHOR/LOUIS-KRAUSS/](http://www.thedailyworld.com/author/louis-krauss/)) • Mon Jan 15th,

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The Aberdeen School District is preparing to revamp its special education programs in the upcoming months, and has compiled an extensive report outlining what changes need to be made to better suit the needs of students with disabilities.

Since August, a six-person special education task force comprised of Aberdeen principals, teachers and administrators has been analyzing each school's approach to special education resources, resulting in a report that breaks needed changes down into 12 pillars, or areas, such as communication, personnel and transitions.

The six of them spent an entire day at each of the district's eight buildings interviewing special education teachers, students and paraeducators — assistants in regular classrooms who are there to help special needs students — who were willing to say what they liked about the programs and what could use fixing.

According to Robert Gray Elementary Principal Richard Bates, who is on the task force, the interviews found that many believe the district lacks a cohesive system that allows special education and general teachers to know how to handle certain situations.

“What’s come out is they need better communication, understanding. ‘Do I do it this way or change it?’ So that’s the structure and system we’re putting into place,” said Bates, who will be leaving Robert Gray to become the special education director next year. “We want to make it clear what the expectations are, and who do I talk to if I have particular needs.”

The task force also took a trip to Franklin Pierce School District in Tacoma in November, as state education officials recommended it for having more ideal special education offerings that Aberdeen could use to model its redesign. They also chose Franklin Pierce because it faced similar difficulties as Aberdeen such as having a higher number of students with special needs, low-income students and a rising number of primarily Spanish-speakers.

Bates said the main thing he noticed from Franklin Pierce was there being more programs students with special needs could participate in, and that they did a better job of communicating with students’ families. This influenced the local task force to create an upcoming advisory committee, which will combine school staff with student parents and community members in order to better understand how special needs students can be accommodated.

But the solution isn’t always to provide more paraeducators and isolating special needs offices. One area the task force hopes to improve is creating the least restrictive environment for special needs students, meaning not providing unnecessary supports for students, which further separate them from the standard classroom.

“The least restrictive is being with our general education kids in regular education classrooms, and the more supports you provide separate from that, it creates a more restrictive environment,” said interim special education director Roger Heinrich.

Currently, about 580 of the district’s 3,500 students have some type of special need, and most are not separated into distinct programs. Each building has a special needs resource room equipped with staff, which students can go to if they’re ever having

problems.

While they are trying to mesh special needs students in the general classroom, behavioral consultant Nell Ellingsen said they're also looking to better understand a policy for when a student would need to be taken out of the regular setting.

"The heart of the story is we want to step up for these kids, because we can change a lot more than they can," said Ellingsen. "But we're trying to delineate whether adults can make the changes that can happen so that kids' lives can get better and get needs met, or if it's something we need to change about our setting and environment."

The major changes likely wouldn't happen this spring, but the task force is working on finishing an action plan by the end of the month which will more concretely outline how new policies and programs could go into effect for the next school year. Bates said they would begin hiring and training anyone they plan to add to staff over the summer, and that the changes would likely involve reallocating funds for current programs so that it would not cost the district more.



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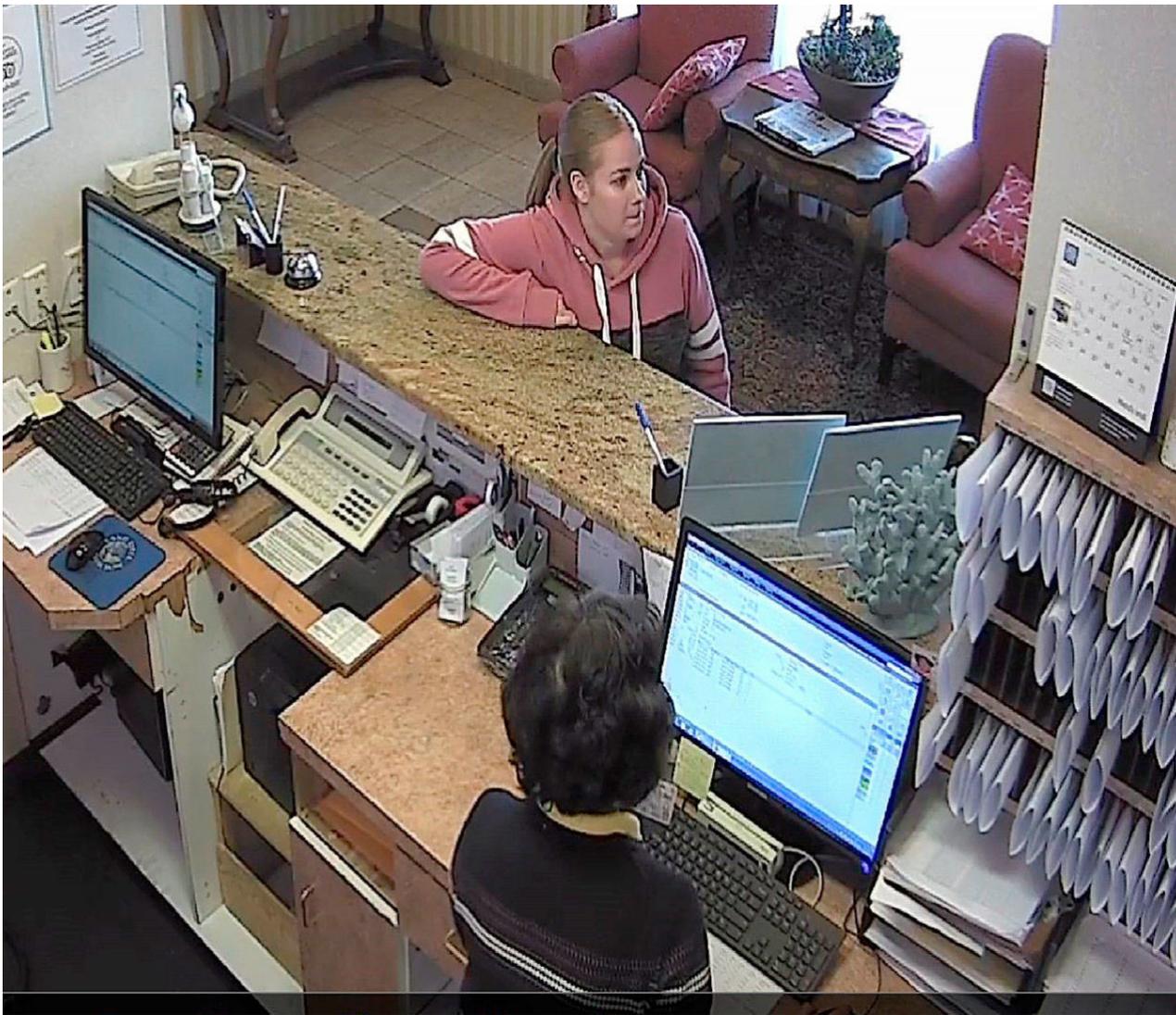
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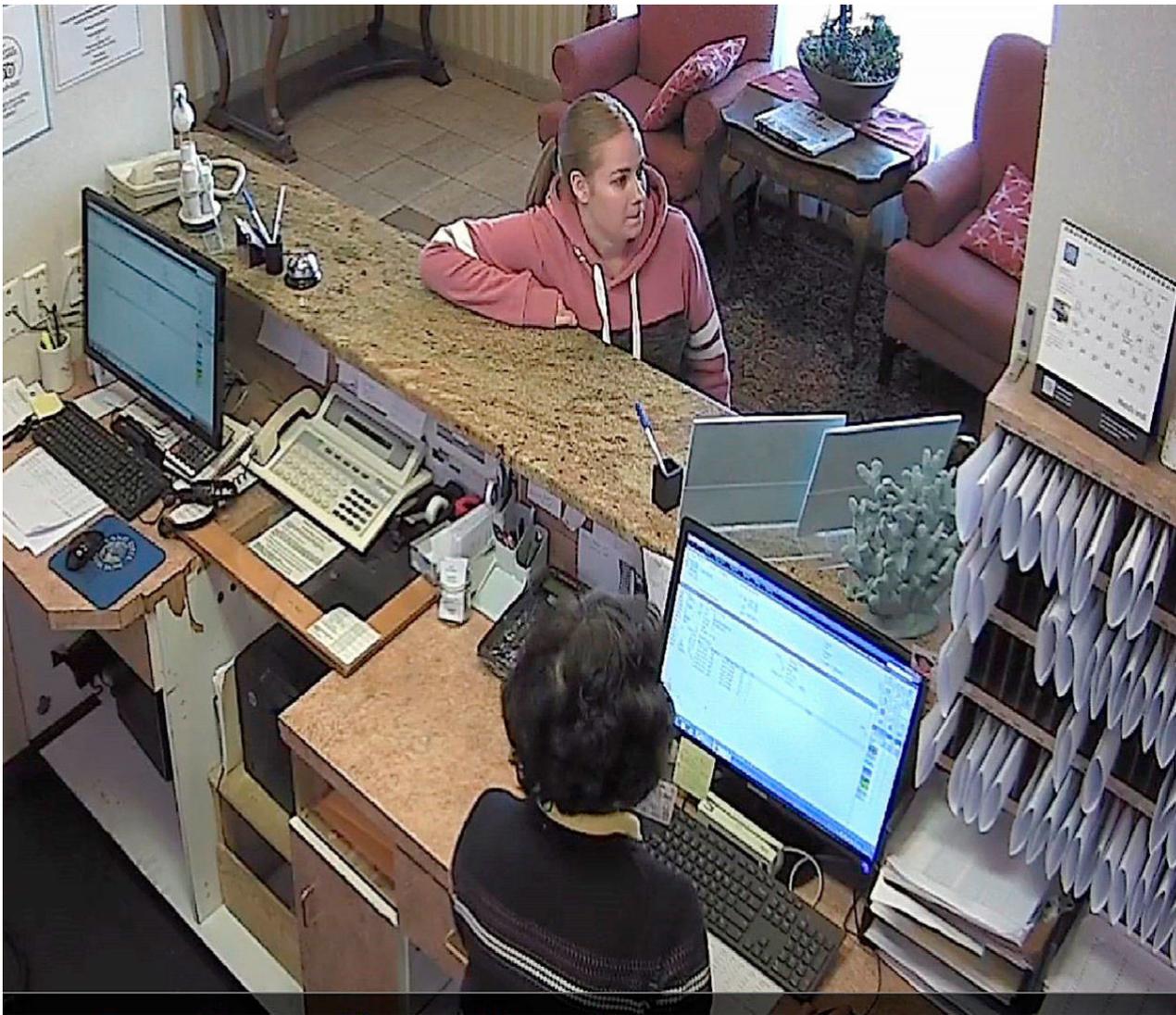
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