

IRON HORSE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Iron Horse Middle School, located in suburban Contra Costa County, is in the San Ramon Valley Unified School District. The school enrolls over 1000 students in grades 6 through 8. Five percent of its students are English Language Learners; 9% are in special education. The school received a Leadership Site award in 2005 for its work in the area of collaboration.

The Impetus for Change

Iron Horse opened its doors ten years ago as a new school. Many of its special educators, recruited from various schools and service delivery models, believed that a pull-out model at the middle school level was not particularly effective. However, during the school's initial start-up period, an alternative was not pursued. By default rather than by plan, the school implemented a traditional approach to special education.

"The pullout model was not working....and they knew it."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

A year and a half after the school opened, the principal pulled the teaching staff together to discuss the delivery of special education services. The meeting was called as an initial step in responding to the local SELPA's new grant program to encourage

schools to create a new service delivery model for special education. The SELPA provided a facilitator, and the school staff attended the series of meetings on a volunteer basis.

"[The principal] came up with bringing all the staff together for what was a bloodletting."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

As a result of in-depth discussions at those meetings, a new way of dealing with special education emerged. The new model was created to benefit not just special educators, but also general education teachers who needed alternative approaches to supporting students who did not qualify for special education services, yet who would benefit from academic support or remediation.

Iron Horse Middle School's Model

Although the model used by Iron Horse has evolved since those first meetings, the initial concept, termed “multilayering,” entailed using the same curriculum for students in both general and special education. Its current implementation holds true to that original vision, and its key elements are as follows.

“They [general educators] had kids in their 6th grade core that were...reading at about the 3rd grade level. And no matter what they did, they could not close that gap.”

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

- Targeted intervention regardless of special education status

The school provides supports and intervention in the core curriculum by grouping children who have special needs in a class for core curriculum coverage taught by a resource teacher. This class is designed to meet the needs of those with learning disabilities. The class, and other curriculum supports (testing modification, extended time for assignments) take place in the school’s Learning Center.

- Collaborative planning and administrative support

Joint staff meetings are held, with special educators attending department meetings with general education teachers. In addition, special education teachers meet with the district school psychologist and the assistant principal weekly to discuss individual children’s needs and other issues. Teachers and paraeducators also meet weekly to review student needs and placement. Common prep times for all general and special educators are used to review student data and placement decisions.

General and special education teachers have strong collaborative relationships, which they consider to be the lynchpin of the entire program.

“There isn’t anybody here that’s counting case loads....If something needs to be done, somebody does it.”

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

The school’s master schedule is built to accommodate the needs of students who need core support.

- Data support for instructional strategies

The school provides summaries of IEP's to general education teachers that summarize the student's challenges (academically or behaviorally), test scores, and any accommodations needed.

- Articulation with elementary and high schools

Recently, Iron Horse teachers received an inservice on local high school math programs to assist them in planning for placement at the high school level for graduating middle school students. Meetings are also held with feeder elementary school teachers to describe the middle school's collaborative approach.

Part of any new-hire interview is an inquiry about attitudes toward and experience with inclusion of students receiving special education services in the general education classroom.

- Parent communication and participation

The school maintains a policy of returning parent calls within 24-hours.

Every year a tea is held for parents of special education children during which parents can discuss the program and address issues with teachers and administrators. Parents are active participants in the classroom.

- Schoolwide behavior supports

The school has instituted a schoolwide, comprehensive anti-bullying program, which began with a core class two years ago called "Don't Laugh at Me" and was followed with "Let's Get Real."

How They Did It

Like many of the schools participating in the Cal STAT project, Iron Horse designed and implemented its collaborative model with few additional resources and little external support.

Planning

The school's principal established a whole-school planning process with help from their local SELPA, who provided a facilitator and technical assistance. A series of four evening planning meetings were held from 4-8 p.m. While the meetings were open to the school's entire staff, they attended on a voluntary basis without compensation. Nonetheless, all of the school's staff participated to discuss the needs of their students and to develop new strategies for helping general education and special education teachers work together more effectively. The collaboration model that was eventually adopted by the school was developed through the brainstorming sessions that took place at these meetings. The teachers brought their own ideas to the table based on their experiences of what worked in other schools in which they worked.

Due to the support of the school's SELPA and the willingness of the staff to commit their own time to the planning process, the cost to the school for developing their multi-layering approach was minimal. The approach was developed entirely in-house without visits to observe other schools with collaboration models or external experts or consultants other than the facilitator provided by the local SELPA. The new plan was implemented at the school the following fall.

"The school was new, and since it had just opened almost all of the teachers had taught at different schools... and all came with their own ideas of what special education was, what they had seen work in the past and what they had seen not work in the past."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Ongoing

The central philosophy of the school's multi-layering model is that all students, including students with IEPs, should have access to the school's core curriculum. Special supports are provided to those students who need more time or special instructional approaches. To accomplish this, Iron Horse has reconfigured the work of its special education teachers from conducting pull-out sessions to teaching Learning Center classes that use the same core curriculum as general education classes, but provide smaller class sizes and differentiated instruction. As a result, the school uses its staff, instructional time and other resources differently to better support students.

Staff

Special education staff at the school spent much of their day supporting students through Learning Center and curriculum assistance classes. The following provides more detail about how the work of the special education staff at the school has been transformed.

Learning Center and Curriculum Assistance. The school's students are completely mainstreamed unless they are academically struggling in a core course (English/language arts, history and math). These students, typically students with specific learning disabilities, receive core instruction in a Learning Center class. Learning Center classes are taught by the school's three RSP (Resource Specialist Program) teachers with assistance from a paraprofessional. While the classes use the same core curriculum as general education classes, they are much smaller, with class sizes of 12-15 students, employ differentiated instructional methods. The Learning Center classes are kept small because with mainstreaming, only about fifteen students per grade level need the specialized setting to succeed. A Student Study Team (SST), consisting of a RSP teacher, two general education teachers, a counselor, an administrator, and a school psychologist determines student placements in the Learning Center.

RSP teachers also offer one period of curriculum assistance for 7th and 8th grade students with IEPs. These classes are held during one of two elective periods and provide assistance with study skills, reading comprehension, test-taking strategies, and home work. Class size is also limited to 12-15 students.

A typical work day for the RSP teachers consists of:

- One period of common planning and preparation time for all RSP teachers.
- One period for case management.
- One period for lunch.
- Four periods of teaching Learning Center classes.
- One period of teaching a curriculum assistance class.

The school has built its approach around creative use of its existing staff. Like other schools in the district, special education staffing levels are determined by the district and dependent on the number of students with IEPs and caseloads at the school. The school has received no additional staff to support the approach.

Time

Instructional Time. Iron Horse's standard schedule consists of eight periods of 40 minutes each. However, the length of Learning Center classes is varied by subject and grade level. English/language arts and history are taught as a block by the same teacher. For 6th grade students, this block is three periods, or 120 minutes long. For students in grades 7-8 this block is two periods, or 80 minutes in length. Learning Center mathematics classes are one period long, but are ability grouped with the aid of a paraprofessional.

Collaboration Time. The RSP teachers have a daily common planning and preparation period during 5th period. On Mondays this time is used for special education's department meeting. The school also has two hours of early release time every Wednesday. Depending on the week, this time may be used for school-wide staff meetings, department meetings or grade level meetings. No other formal collaboration time is provided, although the staff made heavy use of email to communicate with one another.

"It doesn't cost anything to do this. It's about bringing people in who believe the same thing you do and who believe that they are all our kids and that all kids are treated the same and that we do what we need to do to get the kids to where they need to be."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Other Resources

Iron Horse, with fewer than two percent of its students eligible for federal free and reduced price lunch, is not eligible for federal Title I funds, the most common source of discretionary funds found in schools. However, it has redirected the discretionary funds that it does have to support its collaboration approach.

Intervention Programs. The school has implemented several intervention programs for its Learning Center classes including the Teachers College New York Reading and Writing Program for grades 7-8.

Professional Development. The district's calendar includes several days for staff development both before and during the school year. This time may be used to support collaboration, but is largely teacher directed. Aside from this time, there are few resources for staff development at the school other than the funds provided by the CalSTAT Leadership Site grant. The school has used these funds primarily to attend Leadership Institutes and support school visits and presentations.

Results

Parents have come to rely on teachers and trust their approach.

"...[T]he parents feel very, very much a part of the process. And as their kids become more successful....the parents start seeing that this is working...[W]e don't have to have a special committee or a special thing. It's ongoing all the time."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Teachers note that student behavior has improved.

"...[T]he administration wins also. We don't see as many behaviors from the kids because they don't have the frustration in learning."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Special and general education teachers feel ownership and accountability for all the children, regardless of special education status. Special education caseloads have gone down while more students who are struggling are being served.

"The culture of the school is...they're all our kids."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Reasons for Success

Iron Horse's success in implementing a collaborative approach may be attributed to the following two factors. First, the principal's leadership was essential. The principal worked to build a school-wide team in which everyone was responsible for the success of all students. Individuals who apply for positions at the school will not be hired if they do not buy into the school's system. Secondly, the approach has become engrained into the school's culture, which helps to ensure that all of the school's staff believes in and works toward making it successful.

"[I]t's not about a model ... [I]t's about the people who are involved and getting everybody on the same page."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Challenges

Early on, parents of children in special education were concerned that their children were not getting learning support, but now that the model has been in place for eight years, these issues have resolved themselves.

"We had several parents who came here...with advocates, loaded for bear, because their experiences in the past have not been good...but they come here [and] see what we do with kids...[W]e do get a lot of intra-district transfer requests [and] we've got a wait list of 85 kids that want to come here, because they've heard of the Iron Horse program."

--Interviewee, Iron Horse Middle School

Administrators at the district level are in the process of deciding what kind of service model relative to RTI they might like to implement. This may or may not be a good fit with what is happening at the middle school.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

The program at Iron Horse is refined annually based on the issues and problems encountered over the previous school year. An area of concern the school is currently grappling with is how to incorporate Response to Intervention requirements contained in the most recent reauthorization of IDEA. Like many schools, Iron Horse is also searching for strategies for working more efficiently so that it is able to accomplish everything that needs to be addressed.

The school has made a great deal of progress since it first began implementing its collaboration model. Eight years ago, it was one of the first secondary schools to receive a Schwab Award, and now several middle schools have taken up a collaborative model. The school's staff provides assistance by conducting on-site tours and technical assistance for schools both in and outside the district who are interested in starting up a similar model.

Staff noted that the model could not be replicated without administrative leadership at the school site, and without strong collaborative relationships among teachers who implement the model.