

EAST MESA LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

East Mesa is one of San Diego County's Juvenile Court and Community School (JCCS) campuses, serving grades 6 through 12 at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility. All students at the school are residents of the East Mesa Juvenile Detention facility.

The school's daily enrollment is approximately 240 students, of which 70 receive special education services (45% of those with support from a Resource Specialist; 55% in Special Day Classes). Out of the entire East Mesa population 30% of students have been identified as having an emotional disturbance; 65% have a Specific Learning Disability. The average stay at the school (14 to 28 days) is short compared to non-court schools.

While no information on race and ethnicity is available for the East Mesa campus, the JCCS schools all together serve a student population that is 52% Latino, 19% African-American, 24% white, 2% Asian, 1% Filipino, 1% Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American.

East Mesa received a CalSTAT Promising Practices award in 2005, and was given a Leadership Site award in 2006 for the core message area of Collaboration.

Impetus for Change

The East Mesa campus opened when the detention facility itself opened, in August of 2004.

Before the East Mesa campus opened, the site administrator and his Special Education administrator convened general and special educators and encouraged them to research and implement co-teaching at the site. The new model was to be dictated both by the space limitations of the new facility (the campus had no space for separate Special Day Classes) and by a desire to implement best practices in the classrooms for students receiving special education (which comprise about 30% of the East Mesa student population).

"I've heard it said that special ed practices are best practices...It's not just the special education students who are benefiting."

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Planners knew they would need to combine students receiving both special and general education into single classrooms. This would be a change from the traditional special education model used in JCCS up to that time. In this approach, students receiving special education were grouped in separate classrooms for Special Day Classes, or, for those receiving less intensive services were pulled out from the general education classrooms for resource support or other special education services. Teachers noted the heavy negative impact on student behavior and student self-respect from these traditional approaches. Wanting to change an environment in which students in special education were stigmatized and isolated, teachers and administrators sought a different approach.

In the course of their research, the planners identified experts at nearby California State University, San Marcos to provide consultation in how to “scaffold” and co-teach, and in the importance of building relationships among teachers. With these elements, the staff began to build East Mesa’s model.

“What we tried to do when we first looked at co-teaching was to look at a model where there had been success in the past.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

The East Mesa Model

Staffing and Leadership

The core team at East Mesa is the program coordinator (a teacher on special assignment through JCCS Special Education), two special education teachers and their assistants; designated instructional service providers, and three general education teachers. The site administrator and the JCCS Special Education administrator are integrally involved in ongoing planning and implementation of the collaborative work at East Mesa. Two individuals serve as parent liaisons; a credentialed counselor is also on staff. The team serves twelve classrooms at East Mesa.

“As you know, without administrative support or teacher enthusiasm things like this can fall dead in the water... [W]hat a great team and supportive process we have in place to allow this to happen!”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Administrators and educators identify the program coordinator as a keystone of the program’s success, while noting that educators with the willingness and ability to collaborate across traditional divisions are the other major staff factor in success.

“... [the program coordinator] is the backbone of the program.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Special educators at East Mesa have served as leaders and resources for planning, training, and teaming; have brought best practices in instruction and collaboration, and have supported general educators when students with special needs have been included in general education classrooms.

“Their [special educators’] ability to work with general education teachers as well as the Special Ed department has been phenomenal. It has really been a collaborative effort.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

Parent liaisons, part of the staff since 2007, make home visits and provide transportation for parents between home, the East Mesa facility, and court.

In the Classroom

At East Mesa, students in general and special education are placed in the same classroom. A team of educators co-teaches the class.

“What we have in the classroom is a combination of the general education teachers, special education teachers, and teacher assistants really moving around the room assisting all students and their particular needs.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

Special educators have played a key training role in creating in-class collaboration.

“Our special ed teachers have been able to go into the classroom and support the teacher, correcting misconceptions about what to do with our students who are receiving special ed services... [T]hey will fully integrate those students within the classroom and then provide support to these students.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Planning

Joint planning to meet student needs takes place outside the classroom, but the planning approach varies depending on the classroom model and the preferences of special and general educator teacher “teams.” Each team decides how to plan and teach the material, and what classroom roles they will take.

“I meet with my special education teacher at least once a week; oftentimes more than that. She keeps me up to date on the special education students in her classroom; what their particular needs are. We find time during lunch, after school, to collaborate that way.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

“Some of them [general educators] prefer you [the special educator] to teach a lesson...for a week, while they plan for a week.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Using Data

East Mesa created an internal database (using FileMaker Pro) with both individual and aggregate student data. General and special educators use the information in planning meetings to make joint decisions about what their students need.

The database allows East Mesa educators to access district-wide information regarding the students in their school, including CAHSEE pass rates, academic transcripts, and past interventions. Because a student's stay at East Mesa can be quite short in comparison to non-court schools (average stay is fourteen to twenty-eight days), it is especially important to have up-to-date student information for teachers for planning at East Mesa as well as transitioning students out of the facility.

"It's really the hub where teachers start to design the intervention and instruction for their kids."

-Interviewee, East Mesa

"It provides information on student transition, also counseling and parent needs, so that teachers in any area of our program are able to refer students or refer parents...we can access the students if they are at East Mesa or if they've moved on to another program. This allows for continuity of services."

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Special educators have been working to keep a list, updated weekly, to share with general education teachers, of test results for students with disabilities and what academic goals they are working on.

Positive Behavior Support

East Mesa provides positive recognition for academic improvement and achievement, including a "Student of the Month" award. Staff contacts the families to let them know when a student has received an award. Fifty percent of awardees are students in special education, including those receiving Special Day Class services.

"So often we find that the student has really never received any kind of positive accolade before, and the families are really blown away."

-Interviewee, East Mesa

How They Did It

The JCCS program had run a traditional special education program of self-contained or pull-out classrooms prior to moving into the new East Mesa facility in 2004. The administration and staff took advantage of this new start-up to try another approach to serving special education students.

Planning

At the direction of the site administrator a staff planning team began a three month planning process to develop a collaboration model that would meet the needs of the East Mesa students and faculty. The planning team consisted of the site administrator, a general education head teacher, a special education head teacher, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a parent liaison, and a resource specialist teacher on special assignment who served as the program coordinator.

Because of the new facility's space constraints, the planning team gravitated toward a full inclusion model. Their research into various collaboration approaches included reading and discussing books and articles on collaboration, consulting with staff at the South County SELPA, and bringing in the local expert on teacher collaboration from California State University, San Marcos.

At the beginning of the planning process much of the planning time was "volunteer time," meeting before or after school or during lunch periods. Some time was carved out of staff meetings held during monthly early release days that were required under the teachers' contract. After East Mesa learned about CalSTAT through their County Office of Education, they applied for and were awarded a Promising Practices grant in early 2005, and some of these funds were used to pay for substitutes to provide teacher release time for planning.

Ongoing

Staff

The approach adopted by East Mesa was a significant departure from other special education programs at JCCS campuses. These programs consisted of separate Special Day Class rooms and pull-out programs for resource specialist pupils. East Mesa's approach made very different use of their special education instructional staff. Under their full inclusion model, special education teachers spend the school day working with small groups in inclusion classrooms with the general education teacher, providing supplemental and parallel teaching. Because the special education teachers specialize in either language arts or math, they rotate through the classrooms so that students receive additional support in both of these subjects.

Collaboration Time

Because teachers in the program do not receive a planning period, there is minimal formal time for collaboration. Collaboration time tends to be ad hoc, with teams getting together over their lunch period or before or after school. The only formal time for collaborative work continues to be during the monthly staff meetings held on early release days.

Other Resources

Tutoring. Because East Mesa receives federal Title I funds, it does have some discretionary dollars to use for enhancing the program. Most of these dollars are used to provide an after-school tutoring program to assist students with passing the state's high school exit exam, the CAHSEE. Any student needing extra help receives at least one tutoring session daily.

Materials. Most of the instructional materials used in the school were purchased for its general education curriculum. The special education teachers are responsible for making modifications and accommodations appropriate for the special education students. The schools core curriculum consists of Holt for language arts and Prentice-Hall for math. These are supplemented by High Point language arts and AGS math.

CalSTAT Grant. This grant is only additional money available to the special education program. Most of these funds are used for professional development or to provide additional planning and collaboration time.

Results

East Mesa's collaborative approach has had an impact on students in general education, students in special education, on teaching staff, and on the climate and culture in the classrooms.

*"The classroom has become a really dynamic place as part of this process."
-Interviewee, East Mesa*

Students receiving special education are performing better and participating in the classroom more than they ever have.

*"The self-concept of special education students has completely changed...they now understand that they are positive contributors...their self-confidence has really changed."
-Interviewee, East Mesa*

Students in general education have realized some of the challenges that face students in special education and with that realization has come a relaxation of the social stigma of special education services.

“They [students in general education] have learned a lot about what it means to be special education students. I think a lot of the stigma has gone by the wayside, and I think [students] have learned how to understand each other a little bit better...”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Teachers have come to focus on the positive contributions of students receiving special education.

“Teachers see students not just as having disabilities, but having strengths.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

“Teachers...have come to understand their special education students better.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

When students receiving special education services are placed in a general education setting, teachers have found that they have adopted behaviors that are more acceptable. Behavior is closely monitored and documented, with Probation closely involved in behavioral monitoring in the classroom and residential settings. Serious offenses in the classroom have decreased; there are fewer suspension notices and fewer fights. The improved behavior, according to staff, is attributable to the collaborative model.

“They’ve [students] really risen to the expectation...the behavior problems have really decreased.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Graduation and GED rates at East Mesa are relatively high in comparison to other campuses in JCCS.

“We have more students graduate and more students pass the GED than some of our facilities where our kids are there over a year.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Program staff sees the teaching approach as a potential preventive measure for intervention at the level of the criminal justice system.

“By nature of what they’ve done and the programs they’re in, we’re catching them and doing this service for them, and hopefully preventing adult prisons being full of special ed kids who haven’t had their needs met.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Parents have also warmed to the program.

“...[F]rom the parent point of view...it gives the parent extra comfort in knowing they have two teachers to call upon...and their kids are actually learning and passing the CAHSEE.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

The conduct of IEP meetings has shifted, with general educators taking a more proactive role due to their ongoing planning and instruction of children in special education. Parents are appreciative of the information about their child and about community resources that is made available in meetings.

Reasons for Success

The program coordinator attributes their success to being deliberate in recruiting and hiring only teachers who want to work in a program such as East Mesa’s and who want to do collaboration. Everyone on the teaching staff must be committed to the program’s instructional model and philosophy.

Challenges

Because the collaborative work originated out of a desire to change how special education was delivered, it has taken time to shift from traditional general education approaches.

“Getting teachers [in general education] to accept there’s another professional in the room, who might be an expert in a different area than they are...has been a challenge.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

“One of the barriers when we first began was that teachers have these preconceived notions about what it means to be a Special Day Class student...I think a lot of those [notions] have gone by the wayside.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

However, with time and with visible and positive results, this challenge has been resolved.

“A trademark of a JCCS teacher is the ability to be flexible... Teachers...have jumped on board...they are happy that this has worked.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

The paradigm shift has extended to all students, regardless of the level of service they receive.

“Teachers...used to think [of] Special Day Class as a different site, whereas now...we look at it as service time...and provide those services within the general education classroom.”
-Interviewee, East Mesa

While East Mesa has “pretty good” parent participation rates for IEP meetings (60%; 80% if juvenile court judges and educational surrogates are considered), the facility’s location at the extreme southern end of the county does pose a challenge for many parents wishing to participate in their children’s lives and education while the children are placed at East Mesa. The school has met this challenge through the use of parent liaisons, which provide transportation for parents to attend IEP’s and to visit with their children.

Staff turnover at East Mesa has been high. Over half the original staff left about a year and half after the inception of the program at East Mesa. However, the administrators and coordinator have not turned over, and have been able to fill positions and minimize the impact of the turnover.

It has been difficult to implement a district-wide baseline academic assessment on all students at East Mesa, but human effort and the use of their database is allowing staff to increase the percent of students whose assessments have been completed and make the information available to the collaborative team. The staff at East Mesa still struggle to find adequate time for collaboration. One of their goals for the near future is to make time in their school schedule for formal collaboration time.

The transience of East Mesa’s student population makes it difficult to disseminate student information to the next program or institution responsible for the student. Students can be quickly relocated, to a camp, community school, or other location and East Mesa staff know that the transitions could be smoother.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

The staff has realized that, though they started with a focus on collaboration, transition issues have become an emerging priority. They have recently developed an exit packet so that students know where they go next after leaving the facility.

“I think it’s very critical that at exit points...they have something in place as far as a job or stable home situation...because that’s the point at which they can either be successful, or end up being incarcerated again.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa

Program staff wants to use the collaborative model outside of detention facilities. With many students in East Mesa for less than a full school year, staff would like to see the benefits of the approach available to students after they leave the detention facility.

In furtherance of this goal, East Mesa staff has trained other teachers in co-teaching strategies, and plan to hold formalized training within the structure of the regional JCCS meetings to encourage other staff to try this model.

East Mesa was one of the sites recently chosen for site visitation and review for JCCS’ upcoming program quality review, due to the strength of its collaborative model.

How It Works: A Family's and a Student's Story

“They come to the graduation (parents), and they are flabbergasted because they say, ‘This is the first time in my life, and my son’s life, that we’ve had a success.’ They’re crying, the kids are crying...that alone is an impact...Without that, where would they be? They’d be back with the years of failure with their children... [I]t’s a new chapter for them.”

“One particular student I gave some transitional information to--he was actually going to jail. The hope was that he was going to be released from jail, so we gave him apprenticeship contacts that he could call. And he couldn’t wait, so he went to jail and he called the apprenticeship collect, from jail, to set up an appointment...I don’t know that I would have necessarily recommended that, but he did [it]. Not only did they accept the collect call...they were very receptive; they seemed to understand where he was coming from. They said, ‘Please, just stop in as soon as you get out’. So he was received very well. So there really are community resources that don’t slam their doors in our students’ faces. Because that has been so many of their experiences - they lose hope because they tried and they tried, and the door keeps getting shut. So what we’ve been allowed to do through CalSTAT is go out and explore this opportunity so they don’t shut their doors.”

-Interviewee, East Mesa