

ELK GROVE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

The Elk Grove Unified School District, a K-12 District with over 60,000 students in 58 schools, was first awarded a Collaborative Challenge grant in the 1999-2000 school year. Located just south of Sacramento, the district's catchment area has undergone a transformation over the last two decades from a rural area to a populous and diverse suburb. Eighteen percent of its students are English Language Learners and 39% of its students receive meal assistance. In 2005 the district received a Leadership Site award for collaboration.

The Impetus for Change

The Elk Grove Unified School District experienced enormous demographic changes in the 1990's in its transition from a small, rural district to one with a great deal of racial and ethnic diversity (for example, currently eighty languages are spoken by students in the district). In 1994, the district found itself with 16% of its student population identified as learning disabled. In addition, test scores in the district in reading, language and math were low. The large special education population and low averages in the districts' test scores prompted an intensive district-level exploration of how to meet the challenge of educating their children differently.

"We were standing on the bow of the Titanic watching the icebergs."

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

Planners sought to break down the separate "silos" in which special and general education operated in order to improve instruction across the board, no matter the student's designation as special or general education.

"At that point it was the 'us and them' kind of mentality....it was that parallel educational system where general ed had their students and special ed had their[s]...."

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

The district initiated a year-long process of information-gathering and decisionmaking involving almost 100 people in order to decide what approach to take. While district personnel and the superintendent led the planning effort, district and school site professionals and general and special education staff also participated in designing the new approach to intervention.

As a result of the planning process, the district adopted a new approach to its students, which it termed “Neverstreaming”. With this approach, schools would intervene at the first indicators of academic struggle, rather than wait to provide support services only after a child had been formally assessed and qualified for special education services. In this way, the district hoped to reduce the number of children designated as in need of special education, prevent failure before it happened, and improve instruction across the board for all students.

“Don’t wait for a child to fail before you provide them with support services.”

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

At the same time, the district was seeking a new funding model (in the form of a waiver from the State Board of Education) so that it would not be financially penalized for reducing its special education enrollment. The new teaching approach and the waiver were purposefully initiated at the same time. The then-director of Pupil Personnel at the district, initiated the waiver process. (An ADA-based method of calculating special education reimbursement similar to that used by the district under waiver has since been codified into state law for all schools through AB 602, passed in 1997.)

In addition, the district applied for Collaborative Challenge grant funding to support its early collaborative planning process. They became one of the first cohort of schools to receive grants from a partnership of CalSTAT, the Schwab Foundation for Learning, and the Association of California School Administrators. This funding designated the work as a model project and required that they present their model at professional development conferences to encourage similar innovation.

The district was one of the first in the state to adopt a collaboration model. At the time the district started its planning process there were few models in existence from which to learn. As a result, the district’s model is largely home-grown. Elk Grove has subsequently served as a model to many other districts and schools searching for new models and approaches.

School sites were not mandated to participate in the district’s new approach; they were given a choice of continuing with the old methods or opting into the new. The district kept detailed data demonstrating changes in classroom environment and student performance in those schools that adopted the new approach. The school sites that were “early adopters” started to see improvements right away. This proved to be a powerful motivator to other schools in the district. By the end of the first year of implementing the new approach, all elementary schools in the district had decided to come aboard.

“We started at the elementary level with five schools that bought into the concept and wanted to do things differently.”

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

“It was a matter of success selling itself.”

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

Elk Grove's Model

When “Neverstreaming” was implemented in 1999, the key elements of change were:

- Intervention at the first sign of a student’s academic struggle.
- Collaborative planning for placement and intervention by general and special education teachers at school sites.
- Collection of student and class-level data to help teachers determine appropriate placement and intervention plans for students.
- Dedicated days, with substitutes available, in order to free teachers to participate in collaborative planning.
- Classroom-level integration of special education and general education teaching to cover the curriculum, as well as skill groupings for reading and mathematics.
- Training and coaching for all teachers (in new curricula and instructional approaches) as needed to allow the new system to work.
- School-by-school flexibility in implementation.

Now termed “CAST” for Collaborative Academic Support Teams, the approach described above has been refined over the years since its inception to include:

- Use of research-based curricula, such as Language First! and other methods to support student success in reading, and district-level training for all general and special education teaching staff in the use of the curricula.
- Use of Behavioral Support Plans and careful tracking of response to intervention by individual students.
- “Push-button” access to data for teachers through a district-designed e-form (the electronic CAST form), and more sophisticated use of data in assessment and intervention.
- Creation of a staff position at the district to train teachers in instructional strategies on “bridging the gap” in the classroom between struggling students (whether Special Education or not) and more successful students learning the same curriculum.
- Establishing two program technician positions at the district level to help children or families get basic needs (such as food, child care, and so forth) met if that support is needed to maintain a child’s school success.

- Professional development opportunities through the district: postgraduate credit; teacher and administrator credentialing.
- District-level CAST meetings.

The district is also implementing BEST (Building Effective Schools Together: a school-wide positive behavioral support program, designed by Jeffrey Sprague of the University of Oregon) on a school-by-school basis. This model is a good fit for CAST's collaborative and preventive approaches in the classroom.

How They Did It

Planning

Although the district's planning process was extensive and included broad participation of school staff and community members, actual costs to the district were minimal. Because all of the participants volunteered their time, meeting regularly after school for nearly a year, there were no staff costs involved with the process. Further, the planning team conducted no site visits to other districts nor did it bring in consultants or other outside experts for guidance. The district drew on the expertise of its staff to formulate its new approach.

Ongoing

Much of the support for the CAST model comes from using existing resources in the district's schools differently. In particular, the work of special education teachers looks much different today than before collaboration was initiated in the district. The district has also revised school schedules to provide time for collaborative planning. Still, the district has invested additional resources to ensure the model operates effectively.

Staff

Inclusion. Rather than work exclusively with special education students in separate classrooms, the district's special education teachers now engage in collaborative planning and team teaching with general education teachers in blended classrooms, and serve all struggling students in school-based Learning Centers. While special education teachers still work with some students in pull-out programs for part of the day, their goal is to mainstream all students as much as their ability allows.

Learning Center. The Learning Center model serves all students who are not meeting standards, with a particular focus on students who are two or more grade levels behind. The Learning Centers provide a range of interventions based on the needs of individual students. Students with the least severe academic challenges receive supplementary instruction in addition to their regular language arts or math classes and will be removed from the interventions once they have sufficiently caught up. Students with more severe needs participate in Learning Center classes, sometimes in place of their regular core subject classes. A Learning Center class is typically taught by a special education teacher and consists of a ninety-minute block for intensive re- or pre-teaching and support. The most intensive interventions are in math and language arts, but support is also available for other subjects as well.

Time

Collaboration Time. At least one period per week is set aside for collaboration time for teacher teams, with additional days made available throughout the year. At the elementary level, grade level teams have one period per week of collaborative planning time built into their schedules.

Secondary schools provide time for collaboration through a late start time one day per week. Schools also use substitutes to provide release time for general education teachers for more extended collaborative time with CAST team members three or four times per year. These release days are most often used to review assessment data for guiding interventions for specific students.

Other Resources

Professional Development. The district provides a substantial amount of professional development to support its collaboration model. In addition to the collaboration time and the district-wide training position described above, the district trains all new teachers in the collaboration model and in intervention programs used throughout the district such as Language! and BEST. This training is funded primarily by redirecting existing district resources to support these new priorities. Much of the district's CalSTAT award is used to fund professional development in collaboration and to send staff to the Leadership Institutes.

Other Investments. The district has made some additional investments to help support schools to collaborate successfully. These include:

- Hiring two full-time classified Program Technicians to serve as liaisons between schools and local agencies that provide support services for families and students.
- A full-time, certified Program Specialist position to provide training in intervention curricula and strategies.

- The “one-click” computer-based system that enables teachers to easily access assessment and other student data. This system includes a data entry screen that CAST team members may use to enter assessment data and individual learning plans for students.
- Implementation of the BEST positive discipline model.

Results

In the first year, the percent of the district’s students receiving special education services dropped from 16% to 8% of students district-wide. District test scores in reading, language, and math also improved. These changes have been maintained over time. While the district’s student population has nearly doubled over the last ten years, the number and percent of special education referrals has dropped while academic performance has improved.

Schools found improved attendance for students at risk. Staff surmises that students who experience academic and social success do not engage in “avoidance” behavior and thus increase their attendance. They are able to experience that success because their responses to intervention are tracked closely to avoid behavioral escalation or academic failure. Those schools that have implemented positive behavioral supports see further reductions in referrals and suspensions.

“Teachers are telling us that there’s a vast improvement in the behavior of kids.”

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

The district has noticed lower teacher turnover, and little migration from special to general education after class size reduction. They attribute this to the changed educational environment as a result of using the CAST approach in the district. The culture of schools has been described as positive, collaborative, and supportive of teacher initiative.

The process of collaborating to provide education and interventions to all students across traditional boundaries has resulted in universal “ownership” of students, no matter whether they receive special education services or not. Special education and general education teaching staff work together to determine how to meet the instructional needs of all the children, rather than working separately. Further, special education staff are able to support more students who need additional help and spend more of their time on direct instruction rather than on assessment and administration.

Reasons for Success

The district’s success with collaboration may be attributed to a district-wide professional culture oriented toward addressing the needs of all students. The program’s success has also been bolstered by the strong support district administration has received from the local school board to take risks and try new approaches.

Challenges

Even after the many years of success of the model, obtaining and maintaining buy-in by school leadership, particularly principals, can be difficult. Because the program changes started at the district level in the SELPA office, staff and the program are often seen as part of special education and not general education. Noted one interviewee: “A common response [when we do presentations] is, ‘Oh, those are special ed people. What do they know about curriculum and instruction? They just know about special ed.’”

At the same time, for schools that have embraced the model, cooperation and buy-in are strong. For example, school sites have come to rely on the district-funded program specialist who supports them at the site level.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

The district “scaled up” its efforts by beginning in the elementary schools and expanding to its middle and high schools.

As evidence that CAST can work beyond the elementary level, Valley High’s data have been persuasive. Its academic performance indicators, formerly the lowest of the district’s high schools, have improved to place it near the median of all district high schools. Student behavior at Valley High has similarly improved.

The most recent expansion of the program has been the creation of site support teams to assist school sites in continuously improving their CAST implementation. These teams have needed to overcome the automatic assumption by schools that district personnel come on-site because something is wrong. As an example of the type of positive assistance a support team can offer, recently a school needed additional collaborative planning time for teachers on how to align interventions for students going from the middle school into the high school. A site support team, after consultation with the school regarding its needs, was able to arrange for release time and substitutes to free up teachers to plan.

Staff has found that the system they have created “recognizes where it needs to change and develop and expand.” In other words, as their work progresses, the next step becomes apparent. This has sometimes made delivery of technical assistance difficult, in that “next steps” do not follow a predictable path. However, Elk Grove can usually provide help to another district or school in knowing where to start with a change process, if not the road map on later expansion or maintenance steps. The district has provided technical assistance to over 1000 schools in California and nationwide on its model for change.

The district attributes its success at systems change to its adoption of the concepts taught by Sharon Keating and Steve Zuieback through training provided by CalSTAT. The district, in accord with Keating and Zuieback's framework, has worked to create a community of practitioners, using shared information as the basis for developing relationships among collaborators - which in turn is the underpinning of all the district's collaborative programming.

As the district's experience with model continues to evolve, the district hopes to more fully implement the model at the secondary level, particularly in the high schools. For example, the CAST data system is currently only available to elementary schools. The district is working to extend access to the system to all secondary schools by the end of the 2006-07 school year.

"We're in there together. We're not here to tell you what to do. We're here to figure out together what to do."

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District

How It Works - One Student's Story

“This student coming into a middle school had been in a self-contained Special Education program basically all of their elementary life. When we started the process, when the child came into the middle school, the parent as she later recounted with us said, ‘I kept asking David how’s the Special Education going’ and he kept saying, ‘I’m not getting Special Education.’ And then she got concerned and came up to the school and talked with us. And what she discovered was he was getting it, but it wasn’t visible to him. He didn’t realize that that other teacher that was in the classroom was his Special Education teacher. And the child had really low self-esteem; was not proud of being in Special Education. And the parent realized there was such a support system built around the kid...then she saw what happened to her child with being in the more generalized classroom with higher expectations...[T]he kid’s self-esteem just skyrocketed...[T]his is a student who was in a very traditional Special Education setting, who got into this collaborative setting...and academically never required that intense level of services again and just blossomed.”

-Interviewee, Elk Grove Unified School District