

## MESA VIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

### Introduction

Mesa View Middle School, located in Huntington Beach, is one of four middle schools in the 9945-student Ocean View School District in Orange County, California.

Over 740 students are enrolled in grades 6 through 8 at Mesa View, which is home to the district's GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) magnet program. The campus also shares responsibility for a SELPA program for severely emotionally disturbed (SED) students.

In 2006, 27% of Mesa View's students participated in the free and reduced meal program; 10% were in special education (including the students in the SELPA program), and, 18% were classified as English learners. Mesa View received a CalSTAT leadership site award in the core message area of Literacy.

### Impetus for Change

The school had a longstanding concern with literacy, addressing the needs for special education students and a few general education students separately. In addition, the district had always had literacy intervention materials available for its schools.

*"When we first started I think our emphasis on literacy was primarily with identifying our EL [English learner] population and getting the appropriate classes to meet all of their needs."*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

However, it was when a site administrator was hired from outside the district that a new approach to literacy at Mesa View emerged.

*"...An administrator...from outside of our district, [who] had been exposed to other programs and schools... was able to bring those tools to us and enlighten our staff... [It] didn't happen all at once; it happened almost a staff member at a time, but that...began our growth"*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

An honors English teacher, with one of the very few CLAD certificates on campus, was the first teacher to adopt new approaches. She took on a new assignment, teaching the newly formed English Learner class. The changes began in her classroom, with her flexibility and “early adoption” of research-based interventions. She was willing to teach many levels of English learners and to try new approaches.

The resource teachers and a general education teacher, who were already teaching Language! 2<sup>nd</sup> edition recognized and were receptive to the change of placing students in classes based on literacy needs versus label.

### **The School’s Model**

Mesa View’s approach to literacy uses a response to intervention (RTI) model that seeks to provide seamless interventions along a continuum of student skill levels. Interventions are provided based on assessed need rather than on student participation in either general or special education.

The school has taken an incremental approach, beginning in 2003 by targeting the students with the most intensive needs, and adding other research-based interventions as feasible.

*“If you think of the pyramid, we started at the very top, that intensive piece.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Part of the benefit of a step-by-step approach is that it has allowed teachers time to fully implement the needed interventions in their classrooms. Those teachers with more experience in using the interventions are available informally and formally for training, coaching and support in classroom implementation.

### *Tiering*

When students enter Mesa View, information about their reading level is reviewed and students are placed in one of three tiers of literacy intervention.

Students reading at grade level are placed in the first tier and receive instruction using core language arts materials, and may receive additional challenging instruction if appropriate. Those reading slightly below grade level are considered in Tier 2, in which a variety of strategic interventions are used to support literacy either within the core classes and or with an additional class. Tier 3 students, reading well below grade level, or those defined as at risk of academic failure (criteria include a score below 300 on the CST, or other teacher assessments) receive more intensive interventions. Movement among tiers is fluid depending on student need, and can change at any time within the school year.

*Collaborative, Data-driven Decision-making*

Teachers meet monthly in curriculum team meetings by grade level to review individual student data, such as embedded or teacher-created assessments, grades, or standardized test scores. In the meetings, teachers collaborate to determine the correct level and possible interventions for students.

The staff has also instituted “PSSTs”, or pre-SSTs” (Student Study Team). In this setting, teachers and administrators meet over an individual student’s particularly challenging academic or behavioral issues to determine if there are solutions within the tier system, in order to exhaust all solutions before referring a child to an SST, which often precedes a formal IEP or 504 process.

*Scheduling and Staffing*

The master schedule is set up to accommodate literacy interventions. The school’s block scheduling allows for seventy-two minutes of daily instruction in reading and math, while students in Tier 3 receive 144 minutes of intensive literacy instruction daily. Literacy Clinic is an added class provided to identify Tier 2 students needing additional support in decoding. Common instructional strategies are used across all grades and tiers to support literacy as well.

At Mesa View, staffing accommodates student need. For example, a Resource Specialist teaches the Literacy Clinic for Tier 2 students, which may include students in special and general education; a teacher with a general education classroom teaches **Literacy A** class (intensive intervention for Tier 3 students, which may include students classified as English Learners, general education, or those in special education).

*“Our resource teachers teach regular ed students. Our regular ed teachers have resource students. And so, the stigma of who your teacher is...is watered down. ”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

*“This year we mixed our **High Point** [and Language! students in] classes so they they’re not just English Learner kids, they are also native English-speaking kids that have difficulty with literacy...The kids just accepted the mix of students...they can identify that they each have a common struggle.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

## **How They Did It**

Mesa View, without federal Title I funding, has few discretionary resources. As a result it developed its literacy approach internally, primarily through the knowledge and experiences of the school's principal. The principal had come from a high-need Title I school and had developed similar models there. Funding that was available, was used strategically for professional development to get the staff up to speed on collaboration and interventions.

### ***Planning***

In 2003, the first year that the school began working on the model, the principal focused on building the knowledge base and creating a common language amongst staff; thus, building relationships with the staff of her new school. They began the process by collaboratively examining STAR assessment data to identify student needs and matching them to possible interventions. It was clear from the data that English learner students were in particular need of intensive interventions, and the principal used this to get staff support for trying a new approach for literacy. This work took place on one of the days during the work week in the teachers' contract prior to students arriving.

During the first year of implementation work on developing the approach continued throughout the year. Time for planning was carved out of the contract day to allow for a one to two hour curriculum/planning meeting each month. The principal also found money within her regular school budget to pay for substitutes to provide teacher release time for training and collaborative work. Some of these school funds were also used to send a team of language arts teachers (one per grade level) during the summer to a district training to develop a curriculum map based on curriculum frameworks and common assessments.

The principal conducted most of the training on the approach herself, working with teachers several times over the course of the year during the planning meetings. She worked primarily with the school's language arts teachers.

During the second year of the implementation process the school took advantage of training provided through CalSTAT for the Effective Reading Intervention Academy (ERIA). Participation in this project was promoted district-wide and the training consisted of two to three workshops during the year conducted by Kevin Feldman and other CalSTAT staff. The school sent its language arts teachers to these workshops where they were trained in using intervention strategies such as active participation and The Six-Minute Solution. These programs and strategies were then introduced in all of the school's language arts classes.

In addition to the introductory workshops, the ERIA training included site visits to the school by external coaches paid for by CalSTAT. However, the teachers did not respond well to the training provided by the external coach, so the principal began conducting the follow-up training using her staff and herself.

In order to make it as easy as possible for teachers to adopt the new intervention program, The Six Minute Solution, the principal provided release time for a team of teachers to research and assemble instructional materials to use with them. This provided a set of prepackaged classroom materials for teachers to use, alleviating the extra time and work needed for each teacher to develop her or his own.

In addition to their work on intervention programs, the school also adopted strategies for what they called active participation and vocabulary development to help get students more engaged in school.

In year three of implementation, the district paid for all instructional staff at the school to attend literacy training by Anita Archer. Follow-up conversations focusing on vocabulary development and active participation then began in all curricular areas. It was also during this year, that the REWARDS program was implemented for strategic students and Step Up to Writing training took place for all language arts teachers.

### ***Ongoing***

#### *Staff*

The school adopted its literacy approach without bringing in any additional staff. Instead, they found ways to strengthen the instructional program and use existing staff, especially resource specialist teachers, differently to implement the program. The school's two resource specialist teachers no longer conduct pull-out programs for special education students. Instead, they serve any student who needs additional support through intervention classes, literacy clinics or consults with general education teachers.

A typical day for one of the school's resource specialist teachers consists of:

- Periods 1 and 2: Level 1 Language! class with same students both periods
- Period 3: Literacy Clinic for students who are behind but are within 2 grade levels. The Clinic uses the REWARDS program and Step Up to Writing strategies
- Period 4: Level 1 Language! class with same group of students from periods 1 and 2
- Periods 5 and 6: Intensive math classes
- Period 7: Preparation period
- Period 8: Consultation period, working with general education teachers, conducting assessments or coordinating with other teachers

The other resource specialist teacher has a similar schedule, but with a focus on math and writing rather than literacy.

Both resource specialist and general education teachers teach intervention classes, although they do not engage in team teaching. Instructional aides are used to support teachers in core classes other than language arts.

While the school has special day class students, they are not mainstreamed in language arts classes due to the severity of their needs.

### ***Time***

The school's standard schedule is a rotating block schedule of four periods plus a daily advisement period. However, for students who are struggling in literacy or math, the standard schedule is adjusted to provide additional time in the targeted subject area. For example, students in need of the most intensive help receive up to 144 minutes of language arts per day. Time for additional literacy instruction is created by substituting additional literacy or intervention classes for a student's science, social science, or elective classes.

### ***Other Resources***

*Professional Development.* A clear focus of the school is professional development in support of its literacy approach. Training is a continuous cycle with new staff receiving training as part of their induction process and current staff receiving on-going implementation training. Beginning with the previous school year, the district added four late start days to provide an additional 1 ½ hours each day for professional development.

Most of the training for new staff is conducted in-house by the school's teachers and takes place during curriculum team meetings. The timing and intensity of the training depends on the new teacher's experience level:

- First or second year teachers already commit a considerable amount of time to the mandatory state BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment) mentoring program. If they seem able to cope with the additional work, they will engage in training in the school's literacy strategies. Otherwise this training is deferred to later years when they are no longer participating in BTSA.
- If the teacher is experienced, he or she will be paired with a colleague for mentoring or be introduced to the strategies through regular training sessions for the entire school staff. The school will also send them to conferences on the strategies if they are available. At times the district may hold training on district-wide strategies that dovetail with the school's program. The school may also collaborate with other schools in the area that are using the same strategies to provide shared training sessions.

At times the school also receives external support for professional development through the district, County Office of Education or the CalSTAT ERIA (Effective Reading Intervention Academy) project.

*Instructional Materials.* Minimal additional resources were required for instructional materials because the school was already using many of these intervention programs – just not systemically.

*CalSTAT Grant:* The school used its grant primarily for providing release time for professional development. Next year, the school plans to use its grant dollars for training in a behavior program and for internal coaching on its intervention strategies.

## Results

A key indicator of success is that students are exiting the intensive level of intervention and the numbers of students in that level is decreasing.

In addition, the school monitors the performance of students moving out of intensive intervention into core academic classes. Teachers are finding that these students are able to handle the grade level work.

*“We are seeing that students that transition to a core class are experiencing success. And those that aren’t, we actually have a strong support for them, which we didn’t have often times before. Now with some common instructional strategies, good support, those that are having difficulty still [can succeed]. ”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Schoolwide data show improvement, as well. The API has been increasing yearly for the school as a whole, as well as for key subgroups.

*“With the largest growth within the subgroups, many of them have been involved in the intensive program...for two to three years depending on their grade level.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Many teachers find that the focus on best practices, the non-traditional teaching responsibilities, and the collaborative approach have created a positive professional environment.

*“It [having a variety of classes to teach] keeps me grounded at both ends of education so that I’m not pigeonholed into one particular level of learner. It makes a big difference in my attitude toward education.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

*“For me, it’s a welcome challenge every day, because I go from the kids in the level one **Language!** who are just struggling daily...to kids that are begging to be challenged...and I love it.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Teachers have also welcomed the professional development opportunities at Mesa View. The more informal opportunities come from the give and take between experienced and newer teachers.

*“We have newer teachers on campus. They come in and...they can hit the ball out of the park. It’s amazing...how they can adapt to a new curriculum or a new tool...so even though you’re there as a ‘go-to’ person, you’re continuing to learn from your colleagues.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

As implementation has progressed over the last few years, the level of discourse among teachers in curriculum team meetings and elsewhere seems to indicate that data-driven decision-making has become an important part of the culture.

*“Five years ago, a lot was about ‘how I feel things are going.’ I don’t mean to minimize that, but the conversation now is about data as well as the feelings. I get to hear these very rich conversations...It’s starting to become very targeted.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

The CalSTAT award helped greatly with morale, providing needed recognition and encouragement.

*“It was a validation of all the hard work and all the good things that are going on at Mesa View...It really did do a lot for the staff.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

### **Reasons for Success**

The school attributes its success with its literacy approach to the following factors:

- A strong staff that is willing to try new things and work hard toward improving student outcomes.
- The principal’s leadership, knowledge and experience with the school’s intervention programs, and people skills. She does what is necessary to support her teachers.
- Strong and ongoing support from the district. The leadership from central office staff and collaboration with other principals in the district has been invaluable to the school.

### **Challenges**

Using the literacy interventions with fidelity has proven to be a challenge.

*“Are we using it...as it was intended to be used? And then, how do those pieces fit into our regular instruction? And that, actually...is the hardest piece.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

*“I really want us to be able to get to the point where the data is available for conversation, and it’s not so time-consuming for people to either generate or put in or put out.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Administrators are aware that they are not currently exploiting the full abilities of their current software (Data Director, a proprietary system for analyzing school-related data). Conversely, creating timely and useful data is an ongoing challenge.

As a smaller school dedicated to literacy, and serving as the district GATE magnet, the schedule is complex and sometimes cannot flex to accommodate an incoming student.

*“We’ve had kids come in late in the year where our schedule is so tight we can’t get them into High Point...or the Literacy Clinic...so that’s a concern and a challenge.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Gaining parent buy-in as the school moved into a data-driven, literacy-focused curriculum was not always easy. Parents who knew their children’s grades were satisfactory sometimes questioned their children’s placements.

*“I remember parent struggles when we first started, when they thought, ‘My child doesn’t need a class like this. They need something better than this, something more difficult’ ...But the bottom line is-- an intensive class is challenging.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

*“Even this year, when we implemented a literacy clinic...there were several parents [asking]... ‘Why?’ ...There was this acceptance of mediocre or lower. And so we created a letter, and in it, we gave the benchmarks... ‘Here is the CST...fluency...SRI, and here’s where your child is’...Parents don’t know [because] it is very possible in our system to get good grades and have difficulty reading.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Teachers met the challenge by providing data on benchmarks and the gaps between student skills and benchmarks, holding conferences, and helping parents understand the connection between literacy and other subject areas.

*“...If your child cannot read, how are they going to get through a social studies textbook, and how are they going to get through a science textbook?”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

Identifying staff for teaching intensive intervention classes can be difficult. The school also struggles to find time for collaboration.

*“One challenge that I think hits everyone that’s trying to implement RTI... is, who is going to teach some of those intensive classes? Every now and then you get really lucky...However, there are other times where you have to have that really difficult conversation with a staff member privately.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

The state budget situation will create additional challenges for the school. They anticipate class sizes will increase, making it more difficult to provide effective interventions.

Finally, now that Mesa View has become skillful at assessment and placement, it is easier to identify the students who are not performing even though they have all the academic supports they need to succeed. The school realizes that understanding what the next steps are with this group is their next big challenge.

*“Okay. Now we’ve got the structure. We’ve got great things happening within the classroom. What happens now when you still have that child who isn’t making it?...We’re getting down to...the nucleus of some of our issues.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

### **Next Steps and Scaling Up**

Administrators understand the link between behavior and academics and are planning to look at potential behavioral interventions and how those would best fit into current efforts.

Mesa View is planning to move into mathematics instruction with an approach similar to that used for literacy.

With curriculum mapping occurring in most grades, the teachers will be better able to plan across grade levels for literacy purposes.

The school will continue to work on improving its ability to provide timely data and to use it effectively for identifying students’ needs and guiding instruction.

The school would also like to take advantage of its skilled staff to be more systematic about its internal coaching and training.

*“It’s exciting to see how far people have come and to see where we can possibly go...We are now getting to the point where we’re identifying who is truly an expert...or who really shines in certain areas...{so} that we can then start truly doing some of that internal coaching.”*

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*

**How It Works: One Student’s Story**

“I can think of a...boy that was here the second year that we started with this program. He came in his sixth grade year. I think I’m pretty confident in saying [he spoke] no English whatsoever. He progressed through the program the way you want to see every child progress...so that when he left here as an eighth grader, he left having demonstrated proficiency at our High Point level B - great command of the English language both verbally and written; tremendously improved fluency in comprehension scores; spoke with confidence. I think that he served, whether he recognized it himself, as a role model to others at his age...He grew by leaps and bounds.”

*-Interviewee, Mesa View Middle School*