

## PARADISE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

### *Introduction*

Paradise Unified School District's 4883 students are served by three elementary schools, one K-8 school, one middle school, one comprehensive high school and one continuation high school. Located in Butte County, the district schools are in small communities in rural settings. Less than 1% of its students are English Language Learners and 41% of students receive free or reduced price meals.

The district has been collaborating for about eleven years; it began its planning for change in 1997-98. It received a Schwab Challenge Award in 2002 and received a Leadership Site award through CalSTAT in 2004-5, in 2005-6, in 2006-7 and again in 2008-9, for collaboration.

### *The Impetus for Change*

Prior to the changeover to a blended service model, special and general education at Paradise district schools followed a traditional model: elementary schools maintained resource rooms for special education, and also provided Special Day Classes (SDC). There was an effort at mainstreaming and occasional inclusion of students receiving special education in general education classes, but these occurred without the integration and collaboration of the current model.

The district and SELPA staff became concerned about the increases in the special education population. At the same time, low API scores

*“Even if [students] were mainstreamed, I was not held accountable for their academic growth. And that has changed.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

showed the district that literacy was an issue: many students were not proficient. Those students who struggled academically, yet who were not classified as special education students, received minimal support or intervention through Title I. The district started to look for ways to improve student achievement.

*“Twenty years ago, we were trained to identify your students as early as you can so they can be pulled out and get intervention....And now we know that doesn’t make a difference.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

The district superintendent, with support from the SELPA director, initiated a district-wide planning process, in which each elementary school was asked to create a plan for improving student achievement. AB 602 had recently been passed, restructuring special education financing and holding districts harmless financially for reducing their special education populations.

*“...[E]very school came together and began brainstorming, collaborating, working together, and asking, ‘What can we do to improve our programs?’”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

Each school took a slightly different approach but was required to adhere to the model outlines provided by the district: (1) well planned, comprehensive, and with systematic alternatives to traditional methods; (2) intensive; (3) include frequent assessments of student progress and use results to modify student programs; (4) use interventions that are research-based and facilitate accelerated learning; and (5) initiate student intervention on a needs-driven basis, quickly and flexibly. District planners were familiar with Elk Grove’s “Neverstreaming” model and drew heavily upon it to create their own model. The initial planning process was prompted by the district, but was decentralized and teacher driven.

At Cedarwood Elementary, for example, some teachers in lower grades were so committed to trying the new approach that they committed a great deal of personal time to plan their new program. Their school benefited, according to teachers and the district, from the creation of their strong collaborative team. At Ponderosa Elementary, the initial planning resulted in the teaming of Resource and Title I teachers for students (whether in special or general education) needing reading support. Subsequently the school turned its attention to grade-level and combined grade-level academic support.

***Paradise's Model***

The district calls its approach a “blended service delivery” model, since it blends special and general education resources to reach at-risk students. Each school in the district has implemented the model slightly differently, but all schools share most of the following characteristics:

- One period every class day is set aside in which students receive leveled (ability-grouped) instruction in reading/language arts.
- Students in general and special education are in the same classrooms for content and curriculum, with some exceptions. Generally, children are not pulled out for resource classes.
- General and special education teachers’ team-teach in the classrooms with blended student populations.
- Students are formally assessed three times a year, with more frequent informal assessments as needed to meet student needs academically or behaviorally. The district and schools ensure that assessments are not only standards-based but also linked to classroom instruction.
- All professional and paraprofessional teaching staff meet weekly both formally and informally to review student progress, using data from assessments. In addition, planning for continuing students happens at the end of the previous school year. New students coming into schools are assessed immediately so that they are receiving intervention by their second day, if in elementary school, and within two weeks if at the middle school level.
- Each school adopted research-based reading programs as part of the push to improve children’s reading skills.
- Some schools make after-school and summer school available for curriculum review.

The district has initiated cross-school grade-level collaborative meetings in which teachers from the same grade at different schools share strategies and materials, and engage in problem solving around their schools’ approaches to blended services. For example, teachers worked together to develop content vocabulary for their various reader levels.

*“[It] was no longer ‘my’ students, ‘their’ students; it was ‘our’ students.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

Some schools have created learning communities as a venue for professional development regarding collaboration and leadership. As an example, administration and teaching staff at one elementary school have formed a book group in which they study school reform literature, such as *Building Academic Vocabulary*, (Marzano), and *Results* (Schmoker), and apply the ideas to their own collaborative.

### ***How They Did It***

The Paradise School District undertook the district-wide planning and implementation of its blended service delivery model with few new resources. Instead, district and school leaders shifted resources from other uses to support the model, engaged in creative scheduling to create time for planning and collaboration, and took advantage of grant funding opportunities when they became available.

### **Planning**

The planning team established by the superintendent was made up of administrators and teachers from every school in the district, totaling forty members in all. The team met after school every 3-4 weeks from 3:15 to 5pm for much of the school year. These staff volunteered their time and received no additional pay.

To support the planning process, the district sent a team consisting of one staff person from each school on site visits to three different school districts. One of those districts was Elk Grove, whose “Neverstreaming” approach served as a model for the district’s blended service delivery model. The district also brought in several consultants, one from the Elk Grove School District, to help develop their model.

After the district put the final touches on its new approach, it instituted a “train the trainer” professional development model to provide training to the schools’ instructional staff. Under this model, a core group of staff from each school received training from external sources and then went on to train the staff in their own schools. District staff also learned more about successful collaboration strategies and literacy programs later on in the planning process through participation in CalSTAT’s Leadership Institutes. Some of the district’s schools moved forward quickly with planning and implementation activities and were successful in securing programming grants from their local SELPA. The district also used federal Title I funds to help pay for the planning process.

The district’s Director of Special Education assumed a leadership role throughout the process, providing encouragement and facilitating the planning process. A critical step on the part of the district’s administration was to take advantage of the flexibility offered by AB 602 to assure schools that special education staffing levels would not be reduced if caseloads declined under the approach. Adjustments in staffing would only occur in the case of enrollment shifts or declining enrollment.

## **Ongoing**

### *Staff*

Under the blended service delivery model the district's schools moved from serving students in RSP (Resource Specialist Program) and SDC in pull-out or special day class settings to mainstreaming them in blended general education classrooms. All students receive instruction in the regular curriculum, with those who are struggling receiving additional supports and interventions. These interventions are not simply add-ons, but represent a blending of special program teachers, such as special education and Title I teachers, into the general education program. General education teachers working in blended classrooms are generally assisted by a RSP or Title I teacher, or by a paraprofessional who works with students needing extra help. Schools also provide a daily blended reading and language arts intervention class that is leveled by ability and taught by a team of general and special education teachers. Some pull-out and SDC class time remains; the amount varies across schools, but the goal is to mainstream students as much as possible.

### *Time*

*Instructional Time.* The specifics of how instructional time is used under the approach vary from school to school, but the additional support that some students need, whether they have IEPs or not, is now a part of every school's general education program. Support teachers and paraprofessionals team with the general education teacher to provide one-on-one or small group instruction in the classroom for those students who need extra help. Intervention classes in literacy, and in some cases mathematics, are available to all students. After school and summer school programs are also offered in most schools.

*Collaboration Time.* Instructional staff receives time for collaboration on a weekly basis, with additional time available intermittently throughout the school year. How this time is provided varies from school to school. Some of the strategies for providing release time for collaboration include:

- Using the principals to cover classes during release time
- Scheduling school-wide assemblies
- Hiring substitutes 3-4 times per year to cover classes
- Using paraprofessionals to cover classes under the direction of a certificated teacher
- Early release days
- Meeting informally before or after school or over the lunch period

*Other Resources*

*Professional Development.* The district's administration is very supportive of professional development for all staff. Much of the professional development centers around best practices, research-based instruction, technology, collaboration, and teacher leadership. Sources of professional development include training provided through the district's curriculum and instruction department, the local SELPA, and the County Office of Education, which provides training in the BEST behavior support program. District funds for staff development are limited and typically do not pay for teacher release time for training.

The district was one of the first to receive a Schwab Challenge Award in 2002, and more recently a CalSTAT Leadership Site grant. Roughly 90% of these awards have been used for professional development by the district. The district takes full advantage of the opportunities presented at the CalSTAT Leadership Institutes, sending 15-20 staff each year to network, get exposure to new ideas and participate in the workshops.

The district also participates in a local Medi-Cal collaborative that generates reimbursements for school psychologists, speech therapists, and nursing services. Roughly \$10,000 per year through this source, most of which is used for mini-grants to teachers to pay for collaboration, instructional materials or special projects.

*Assessment.* Assessment plays an important role in the district's approach. Students who are new to the district are assessed to determine whether they will require instructional interventions. All students receive formal assessments three times per year to gauge progress and inform instruction. On-going assessment is also used for progress monitoring of interventions.

*Interventions.* Schools in the district employ a number of intervention strategies. All schools are required to provide extra learning and intervention time, but it is left up to the principals to determine how to configure this time. Most schools offer after-school and summer programs to provide remedial instruction and homework help. These programs may be funded through the federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center grant program, state Prop 49 Before and After School grants, and extended day and year grants offered through the County Office of Education.

*"This has made us use our resources more effectively and made us think outside the box to continue what we already have going... [I]t makes us much more effective as educators."*

*--Interviewee, Paradise Valley Unified School District*

**Results**

Cedarwood Elementary's API scores increased from 609 in 2001 to 827 in 2006, and subgroup scores increased as well as overall scores. District API scores increased in 2006-7 to 738 from 737 and 734 in the two previous years. However, while most criteria were met in making adequate yearly progress (AYP), students with disabilities did not make adequate yearly progress in 2005 in math and English language arts.

The percent of students in special education is 11% of the total student population in 2006.

In general, teachers in the district believe that its instructional programs have become much more effective, achieving better results with the same level of staffing. By "thinking outside the box" they are doing more with the resources they have.

*"Something the data won't show you is the interpersonal relationships that we now have at our staff sites...So besides what it's doing for kids, it's also doing something for teachers."*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

### ***Reasons for Success***

Although collaboration was initiated at the top by the superintendent and other district administrators, their strong support and enthusiasm led to buy-in by school principals and teaching staffs. A strength of this approach as adopted by the district, was allowing for variation from site to site in the implementation of the approach. The district's leadership established the goals but allowed schools the freedom to tailor the approach to best meet their needs. As a result, no two sites collaborate in exactly the same way. The support of key teacher leaders in the district also helped to pave the wave for the new approach.

### ***Challenges***

Teacher concerns at elementary schools, especially resource-poor schools, were a barrier to early implementation of changes. General education teachers felt unprepared and thus unwilling to teach special education students. Many in both special and general education believed some schools were short-staffed even without taking on new programs or approaches, especially compared to other schools in the district with more resources and better academic performance.

This barrier was overcome as students from lower grades using the new model moved into upper grades at increasingly higher achievement levels. Teachers noticed the differences in their entering students, and this evidence convinced them of the utility of the model.

Teachers needed to learn collaboration skills.

*“I know that one of the obstacles was that we had to train our staff how to collaborate. You have to really have a great facilitator...If you don’t have something to collaborate around, then you’ve got all these complaints and it turns into a ‘co-blab-oration.’”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

Staff found it challenging to create school schedules that allow for the period of blended instruction. At the middle school level, schools have needed to shorten other classes, and teachers trade off the lost content instruction time with the intervention time.

*“...[T]he biggest challenge is making sure that all schools in a district are aligned with this common vision...and...getting on board those who are not yet involved and don’t yet quite share the vision in a productive way, convincing them, and getting them going. I think that’s going to be our next big step.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

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

In Paradise, the model was implemented first at the elementary level, and about five years later, at the middle schools and high school. As a result, more extensive collaboration occurs at the elementary level than in the district’s secondary schools. The middle and high schools have also found it more difficult to schedule students’ intervention time, but they are working to plan collaboratively and intervene earlier. The district continues to strive to equalize the quality of collaboration across all schools so that services are consistent throughout the district.

*“Our middle and high school[s] are really coming on board.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

In some cases, schools are not so much expanding their services as refining them to better meet the needs of children. For example, one elementary school has reviewed its schoolwide data and found that students would benefit from an

increased focus on reading comprehension. The school will focus on this goal in the future.

*“Dufour said that schools should not be a place for teachers to teach. And when I first heard that, I thought, ‘What is he talking about?’ And then he said schools should be a place where kids can learn, and if they’re not learning, then you’ve got to make the changes so they can learn...[T]hat was huge for me. It’s not about my teaching; it’s about their learning.”*

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

***How It Works - Two Students' Stories***

“[A] student that we had at our school...was having fits in the classroom and [was] under the table and growling at other students. We were told he was schizophrenic and emotionally disturbed, and he seemed like he could be very dangerous. He was being pernicious and just self-destructive, so we ended up having him go to [our] Special Day Classroom. He had been at our school for not even two months before we had made that choice because the teachers were really concerned about the safety of the other students...But he went to [another school in the district] and they don't have a Special Day Classroom and I went to go visit that teacher a few months later... I went to see what was going on and how things were going, and the teacher didn't understand what my concerns were with him. I said, 'How is that going and how are you adjusting to that?' ... and that [the] teacher didn't know what my concerns were, or why, was revealing... I was thrilled that he was able to do that and be successful; and he was just a student [among other students].

*--Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*

(Continued)

***How It Works, cont'd***

“[Another student’s] family has a history of learning disabilities... and, honestly, when the parents came to the door, it was a difficult situation. I just went, ‘Oh, no.’ But he came into this school, and when he first started kindergarten, he was very unresponsive. He was oppositionally defiant. He would not do anything the kindergarten teacher asked. He would just sit in a chair. If you tried to get him to do anything, you would just get this disruptive behavior, so we were very worried about him. By the time he got into first grade, we said, ‘Well, we’re not going to test any child that’s that young. We’re going to work with him.’ So my reading teacher, academic support teacher (we train reading with every teacher), she said, ‘Let me have [that student]’ She said, ‘I know that he can learn.’ So she started working with him in Reading Recovery. In 16 weeks, he started learning to read and began to read. And we were all looking at this child who showed us that we cannot judge a child that young or that early and suspect that they would have a learning disability because you just don’t know what the cause is for the effect that you’re getting. And so we went on and we continued to support him from Reading Recovery to a small SIPPS group, which is using decodable text in first grade. From there, we...supported him in second grade and he’s received interventions and support with all our different interventions. And now... it’s not to say that he doesn’t have some issues, but basically, if you walked in the classroom, he’s working along with all the other kids. He can read. He can do math. There’s no behaviors. I mean you aren’t getting any oppositional defiance. I teach [my class] on Fridays, that’s the class that he’s in, and he blends right in with the other students.”

*-Interviewee, Paradise Unified School District*