

POINT ARENA SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Point Arena is a two-school district on the rural Mendocino County coast. Its K-8 and high school enroll just under 400 students. Seventeen percent of the district's students are classified as special education; 31% are English Language Learners; and 69% are in the Free and Reduced Price Meal program. The district is served by the Mendocino County SELPA. Point Arena School District received a "promising practices" award through CalSTAT in 2004-5 and then received a Leadership Site award in the fall of 2005 for collaboration.

The Impetus for Change

Point Arena District began to review its special education program when its county special education steering committee began in 2003 to explore how Response to Intervention (RTI) might affect county schools. While the district had been using benchmarks and standards to track student progress, its schools had very little, outside the traditional models, to support students who were not reaching the standards. The high school had just opened a Learning Center as a first step toward supporting all students academically, regardless of special education status. The county planning effort and the district's own concerns about serving its students in special education led Point Arena toward a blended services model.

At around the same time, the district made a decision to focus on reading improvement for all students at the elementary level, and had received a Reading First grant (a Federal grant for reading improvement). The elementary school wanted to address both special and general education reading needs through the grant and sought ways to integrate those programs. Through that grant, they were able to hire two teachers for reading support and to acquire an online program for assessment input and review.

As the district considered how to incorporate reading intervention with an overall model change, they sought information about other working models. School and district staff had learned about Paradise Unified School District's collaboration through the Mendocino County SELPA as the district and the SELPA staff discussed internally how blending of services might be accomplished locally. Point Arena paid a site visit to Paradise, attending an institute sponsored by CalSTAT on replicating their model.

Borrowing from Paradise USD's approach, the district proceeded with universal assessment and targeted reading interventions at the elementary level. The resources of

the Reading First grant allowed them to use their two teachers to conduct schoolwide screening and diagnose reading issues in K-8. Then the school decided what intervention was needed for individual students based on that assessment. The high school focused on mathematics rather than language arts for assessment and intervention.

Prior to the implementation of these changes, the district had had a history of difficult relationships with parents.

“People would ship their kids an hour north to Mendocino because they thought that was such a better school....There was an adversarial relationship between parents and teachers in general in the school district.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

With turnover of personnel, the changes began.

“As time went on...new people came in with more inclusive ideas.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

With many factors converging to support a new model, the district proceeded.

Point Arena’s Model

Point Arena adopted its model in 2003. The core of the district’s approach is universal language arts assessment, diagnosis, and intervention, paired with teamed teaching, blended classrooms, and a Learning Center on both campuses. School schedules are planned around the instructional needs of students as determined by previous year-end assessment.

- Learning Centers on both campuses

At the high school, a Learning Center is available both on a scheduled and drop-in basis, not only for students needing help with improving reading skills, including those with IEP’s, but also for students needing help with A/P classes, study time, or assistance with class notes. It is also where the school’s career and transition programs take place. The elementary school’s Learning Center is a place for in-school and after-school intervention classes, test and assignment accommodation, and collaborative meetings by teachers. Both are staffed by special and general education teachers.

- Collaborative planning time

Early release for both schools on Wednesday is used for vertical (K-12) teaming or school site collaboration.

“...[T]hat’s the one thing that helps regular classroom instruction the most...because it takes a lot of that pressure away...being able to collaborate with as many teachers ...and get their feedback and come up with group plans for these kids, rather than just saying, ‘How am I going to get this kid to pass the next test?’”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

At the high school, the collaborative team of general and special education teachers and paraeducators is called the Academic Success Team. It meets on Thursday after school to address individual support needs of students. Collaborative meetings are data driven.

“...[I]nstead of saying, ‘Oh, Johnny’s a bad kid,’ or, ‘I can’t get him to sit in his seat,’they’re talking about these diagnostic assessments... their fluency level...comprehension.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

- Assessment, diagnosis and prescriptive interventions for language arts and math

Placement in reading interventions at the elementary school is based on a battery of assessments, but is fluid and changes whenever a student is ready to move to a different level.

The high school has begun including students in special education in general education math classes, beginning with a universal requirement for one-year class of Algebra I, team taught by special and general education teachers. An array of supports, including tutorials during and after school and traditional pullout work, is available to support the children for whom the one-year class is expected to be challenging. The school has installed software that allows children to see their in-class test scores right away.

- Ongoing program review

The district is in the early stages of its program, and has made changes every year of its implementation. The two schools in the district rely on one another for technical assistance, implementing one program element at one campus and then modifying it for use in the other school. For example, the elementary school will be building on the high school’s math assessment and intervention efforts by implementing its own inclusive program for math next year.

Results

Overall, the academic culture of the school has shifted in a positive direction.

“The academic bar has just simply been raised. There’s much more seriousness.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

Students seem to be approaching their classwork with new attitudes.

“It’s so amazing...the boys joke about...being ‘school boys,’ and it used to be a term of derision, and now...they even label themselves that way and it’s with pride...There’s a complete change in their own perception, their own expectations for themselves.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

The more sophisticated diagnostics and the opening up of collaborative relationships have changed how the district helps students who are developing their English language skills.

“I’m the ELD person, and it’s become very apparent...over the years that many of [the English Language Learners] also are diagnosed with IEP’s. Some rightfully so, and some I’ve always questioned...[The resource specialist and I] talk together because we share almost all the same kids practically. That’s been really fruitful to see...what kid has special ed been helping, and what kids has special ed not been helping...to look at these kids one on one and use the diagnostics to find out what’s really going on here...”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

The number of special education referrals districtwide has dropped by almost 90%, while the number of children with IEP’s is almost half what it was in years previously (from 43 children to 22). Parents and teachers no longer are concerned about students’ exiting from special education because students universally receive the same services and supports regardless of special education status.

The principal and district superintendent are credited with leadership by empowering teachers to implement proposed programs, and by maintaining staffing levels even as the numbers of special education students have dropped.

“My case load has been cut in half in the last four years....but instead of spending that time with those 40-something kids doing Woodcock-Johnsons and filling out IEP’s...all this time is taken working with kids directly, being proactive...teaching.”

--Special education teacher, Point Arena School District

The percentage of high school students who are UC/CSU eligible has increased to 63%, the highest percentage in their region (Region 1, including Humboldt, Lake, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties).

Challenges

The district would like to see additional parent involvement, but staff realize that there are cultural and economic barriers to that. Nonetheless, teachers do see strong parent participation on a number of fronts. Both schools have 100% parental participation rates IEP’s, which are frequently held off site to accommodate families. A very high percentage of parents participated in a recent survey and meeting to review special education services districtwide.

“You have families where both people are working, and often two jobs, because it is expensive to live here...There are so many demands on parents’ time...I don’t know how much better we’re going to be able to do unless there are some higher paying jobs coming to our community.”

--Interviewee, Point Arena School District

Teacher buy-in has not been automatic, but it is increasing. As students show success, teachers are becoming convinced of the utility of the model.

Finding time to collaborate and plan is always an issue, but the school administration and the district have helped teachers meet that challenge by providing release time and training.

Scaling Up

Point Arena District teachers and administrators have participated in providing technical assistance to other schools and districts through CalSTAT. Another high school located in the county recently paid a site visit to both the high school and the elementary school to review its model.