

RANCHERO MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Ranchero Middle School is located in the town of Hesperia, a community in the high desert of San Bernardino County. Of its 1365 students in 7th and 8th grades, 48% are in the Free and Reduced Price Meal program, 10% are English Language Learners, and 9% are in special education.

Because the school is in the Hesperia Unified School District, it has implemented ExCEL (Excellence: A Commitment to Every Learner), a districtwide collaborative approach to special and accelerated education described in detail in Hesperia USD's profile. Ranchero has brought a strong parent involvement component into its collaborative, in addition to positive behavioral supports. Staff have been collaborating since 2000, and Ranchero Middle School received a Leadership award in 2005 through CalSTAT for its parent partnership.

The Impetus for Change

The school's initial move toward collaboration was prompted by its awareness that students' writing scores were not as high as they needed to be, in spite of the effort that teachers were making in their classrooms.

The principal of the middle school became determined to help students achieve proficiency in language arts, particularly in writing.

He convened the teachers and asked them to select a research-based program to improve students' writing, and to work out the details of implementation. Teachers volunteered their time after school for the selection and planning process.

"[The principal's] goal was, 'I'm sending people to the high school that know how to write.'"

-Interviewee, Ranchero Middle School

As a backdrop to the planning effort, the school leadership had adopted Margaret Wheatley's organization change principles as taught by Sharon Keating and Steve Zuiback through CalSTAT training institutes. In this model, true change and increased student achievement emerge not from simply changing organizational structures, but by

working “below the green line” on changing relationships, encouraging group ownership of a change process, and ensuring access to information about change and goals.

“I think the team effort, again, was central to creating that culture of everybody working together.”

-Interviewee, Ranchero Middle School

The school’s planning for writing improvement was also taking place in the context of the districtwide adoption of ExCEL, a set of strategies for collaboration between general and special education staff. In this model, schools implemented leveled and differentiated (“scaffolded” in ExCEL terminology) instruction, team teaching to blended student populations (those receiving general or special education services, or those in accelerated programs), and data-driven student placement and reassessment.

The teachers at Ranchero Middle School identified Step Up to Writing (SUW) as a research-based program likely to be a good fit for their school. Under this program, all classes and subjects (not just language arts) use SUW’s framework and techniques and writing is practiced in all subject areas.

“...If it’s across the board, it’s more effective, because the kids are getting the same thing over and over...It’s reinforced everywhere they go.”

-Interviewee, Ranchero Middle School

Teachers schoolwide are also trained in a variety of other approaches. These include Marzano’s strategies for teaching and learning, Bloom’s Taxonomy for developing students’ critical thinking skills and the use of “Thinking Maps” as tools to generate, organize and communicate ideas. The school also uses Cornell notes, including AVID strategies, and has provided teachers training in Ruby Payne’s framework, “Understanding Poverty.”

The schoolwide writing program changes were being implemented at the same time the district was implementing ExCEL.

After a few years of implementing Step Up to Writing and the other research-based programs noted above, and providing leveled instruction as part of the district’s ExCEL strategies, teachers and administrators began to consider how else they could improve student achievement and test scores. As they reviewed the steady improvements in API scores, and discussed how the school could move up to the next level, the idea arose of involving parents more deeply with the school’s activities. The principal had had a strong history of encouraging parent participation, having created an elementary-level program to coach parents in teaching literacy at home in partnership with the schools. In his work at the middle school he looked for innovative ways to involve parents in the school. As a result of his joint planning with the teaching staff, the school created a

family resource specialist (FRS) position on campus as a means to increase parent and community-level involvement with Ranchero Middle School.

Ranchero Middle School's Model

Parent participation at Ranchero is an extension of the school's many planned efforts to improve school achievement. Those efforts are the context for parent involvement, and include ExCEL as the teaching framework, schoolwide reading and writing as noted above, and a behavioral support program. The school uses Standards Plus and district pacing plans to ensure coverage of standards in a timely way throughout the year.

"The kids don't slip through the cracks anymore and ExCEL is really the foundation that all of this collaboration came from."

-Interviewee, Ranchero Middle School

Under the ExCEL framework, all incoming students from the 6th grade are assessed prior to arrival on campus. Teachers also consult with the 6th grade teacher regarding

"It sounds crazy to have kids moving all year long with the schedules when they need to, but that's what we do and it works."

-Interviewee, Ranchero Middle School

individual student needs. Through careful assessment and individual attention, students are placed within the appropriate "scaffold" in their grade level, which determines the level and type of teaching and remediation or acceleration offered. Classes are a mix of special and general education, and students are moved among scaffold levels as needed, depending on their progress and ongoing teacher determination of need.

Students and their progress and placement in scaffold levels are discussed during common prep time, as needed. Teachers need less frequent discussion of the schoolwide writing program now that the program is in full implementation campus-wide; those meetings are now held approximately quarterly.

A leadership team meets twice a month, focusing on improvement in teachers' professional practice; school families meet every three weeks to be brought up to date on school activities and goals, to observe classrooms, and to plan their support of school events.

- **Parent and Community Participation**

Parents are invited on campus to support Associated Student Body activities, including academic celebrations and other school events. For example, Ranchero held a Math Night and Language Arts Night for the first time in 2006; they were both very well attended. It was a parent who had initially suggested a Math Night to the family resource specialist.

The FRS has also been able to reach out to connect the school to the broader community, particularly with local service clubs, and through the campus Career Day.

The FRS is funded through school improvement funds, with three part time positions funded in the district – one part time position at the other middle school, and two positions (one each) at the districts’ two high schools.

Results

School staff have not collected data specific to parent participation impacts, although they have discussed comparing achievement information of students whose parents participate at the school, and students whose parents have not participated. Since implementation of the school’s collaborative model, reading and writing interventions, and behavior supports, schoolwide scores have improved substantially. For example, in 2004-5, API scores increased by 37 points. Writing scores have also increased, with higher percentages of scores falling in the 4 to 8 range.

“I think one of the outcomes...is that the school has high expectations. You can see it in every class you walk into.”

-Interviewee, Rancho Middle School

Challenges

It has taken teachers a while to understand how a family resource specialist can help them. These barriers have been overcome as the teachers have seen through their own participation in FRS-organized events, such as Math and Language Arts nights, how the FRS can bring parent interest and volunteerism to the school.

Language barriers do exist between monolingual English and Spanish speakers in the school community, but the school has attempted to bridge that gap with interpreters at events and Spanish speaking assistants for the FRS.

Students, too, have come slowly to the idea that parents have a role on campus and at school activities.

“I think definitely, it’s the students themselves [who] can be a barrier, because they want to break away from mom or dad and then, they don’t necessarily want mom and dad to be there outside the classroom.”

-Interviewee, Rancho Middle School

Scaling Up

Currently, the district funds part-time family resource specialists at four schools. There are no current plans to expand the numbers of specialists, but the specialist at Ranchero Middle School foresees an expanded role for parents in the classroom.

How It Works: One Student's Story

“Last Tuesday...one of my students, and she's lower ExCel student, had a five-paragraph essay printed in...our local newspaper on her favorite teacher...So that was a big one...It was written very well. It was very well organized...It was written in 'Step Up to Writing' format and you could tell. I mean it went boom, boom, boom, boom...I read it to the staff and as I'm reading it, [I'm thinking] 'A five-paragraph essay. Perfect.'”

--Interviewee, Rancho Middle School