

SANGER HIGH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Sanger High School received a Leadership Site Award through CalSTAT in 2005 for collaboration. The school serves over 2,200 students in grades 9 through 12. Seventy-two percent of the student body participates in the Free or Reduced Price Meal program, and 17% are English Language Learners. Sanger High School is located in Fresno County and is part of the 8200-student Sanger Unified School District.

The Impetus for Change

Sanger High School's move to "full inclusion," as its program is called, was part of an overhaul of the school's academic approach prompted by several factors. The overall goal of their changes was to increase academic rigor and expectations for all students.

Sanger High School was classified by the State Department of Education as an underperforming school in need of immediate intervention in 2002. That same year, their accreditation body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), suggested that the school address the issue of tracking students into college preparatory and non-college preparatory classes. The school was required to immediately address their performance and accreditation issues.

At the district level, a new Director of Pupil Services had recently been hired who was an advocate for full inclusion and who believed that the solution to Sanger High's issues lay partially in revamping how special education was being implemented. She had, during her brief tenure to date, overseen the creation of the middle school's full inclusion program. The students receiving special education services who were moving from middle to high school were experiencing difficulties with the transition from full inclusion back to a traditional model. This, too, was creating pressure on the high school to move toward inclusion.

"It became difficult to fit them back into that old mold. They had pretty much been accepted by all the other kids too...and then to go back and do just a special education setting [in high school] was not what they wanted."

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Aware of state standards, the special education teachers knew they could no longer go on teaching a "parallel" but different curriculum to their students in Special Day classes,

particularly with the school's goal of providing full access to the core curriculum for all students.

The high school was directed by the district to create a full inclusion program as one change of several the high school would undertake to meet its many challenges. Its administration believed that such an approach would benefit all students, not only those in special education.

Planning with the district and school special education personnel proceeded and the first pilot was put into place. It was introduced at a faculty meeting in the spring of 2002 and was piloted with some teachers that had a history of being open to inclusion practice. The district pitched the idea as simply a method of providing more support to general education teachers who already had students receiving special education services in their classes.

Sanger High School's Model

In 2002, the first year of Sanger's "full inclusion program," as it was termed, all students receiving special education services were placed in general education classrooms. The high school assigned each of 4 resource teachers to an academic department. Each resource teacher served as a consultant to the general education teachers and aides in one department regarding the students in their classes who were receiving special education services. For example, for the 22 teachers in the English Department, one consultant was available to assist them with all inclusion issues pertaining to their classes and the students in those classes who were receiving special education. In addition to being responsible to all teachers in a department, each resource teacher also carried a caseload of students with IEP's.

The Special Education staff found in that first year that they could not in fact serve effectively as consultants to so many general education teachers. The school administration realized its approach was not sustainable and began to revisit its methods.

"The first year we implemented inclusive classrooms and collaboration, two or three out of the four [special education teachers] who had started it went on high blood pressure medication and said, 'This isn't going to work.'"

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

In consultation with the resource staff, the school came up with a revised approach. Resource teachers would still serve as consultants to general education teachers, but they would limit their consultations to the English and math departments rather than support all departments. They would continue to carry a caseload of students with IEP's, but those students' accommodations and goals related to English and math would be handled by another Resource teacher. This revamped model was put into place in 2003 and continues to the present.

Under full inclusion at Sanger High:

- Special education teachers modify curriculum, adapt tests and homework, and provide accommodations for tests and assignments for students receiving special education services who are in general education math and English classes.
- Special education staff also discuss instructional needs of students in special education with general education teachers; and coach and train general education teachers on differentiated instruction strategies.
- Special Education aides and, often, the resource teachers themselves, are present in the classroom to assist general education teachers with all students, those both in special and general education. Though parents sometimes request one-on-one aides, the school does not provide them. Aides are available to help all the students in a classroom with the full core curriculum.

“Their [aides’] role has dramatically changed... [They are] in a general ed class at a level they’re not used to...having to learn the curriculum...having to take the English books home to read so they can support the students in the classroom...becoming a tutor.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

- Special education teachers communicate with the general education teachers by asking them to fill out tracking slips on special education students in their classes.
- The administration ensures that special education staff get off-site training, and that they go as a team when possible. There has been no formal training provided to special or general education teachers on inclusion, but some general education teachers have had recent training on differentiated instruction for English Language Learners, which they are aware can be helpful in differentiating for children with learning challenges as well.
- The high school has created Learning Communities by course topic; teachers within them collaborate around individual student progress data, creation of common assessments and standards-linked benchmarks, and review of curriculum maps. Special education teachers have in the past participated in the learning communities but their attendance has fallen off. The administration would like to see them more involved in the future.
- Parents are included in the communication loop regarding student needs and progress.

“Our parents trust us because we talk to them.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

The school will be flexible, for example in meeting the needs of a student for a certificate. The school and teaching staff

has made it easy to be in touch with parents via email and telephone. Parents, in turn,

support teachers in their work with the students. For example, if extra time with a student is needed in order to provide accommodation or remediation, parents ensure that the student is present when teachers request it.

- The high school introduced English language arts and reading intervention programs for all students, not just those in special education, as part of the school's focus on academic rigor for all. These have contributed to the rise in test scores.

Results

Students who are receiving special education are seeing their test scores improving more quickly than any other school subgroup. They are passing the CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) at the same rates as students in general education.

“Special education students have more confidence in themselves. They are giving speeches in our classes and debates. They’re getting up in front of the class and doing presentations. They are involved in activities outside the classroom....They’re in sports...I don’t think they would have been as inclined to do so had they all been stuck in their little rooms in the special education department. So I think it’s been very important for them socially also.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

There are fewer discipline and behavior issues with students who receive special education services than previously. This is partially due to peer expectations.

“Now that they’re in there [in the general education classrooms], they don’t want anyone to know that they’re special ed. They want to fit in, so now they’re going to do what they have to, to show they belong.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Students in general education benefit from having more instructional personnel in classrooms available to help them. They also benefit from the modified or differentiated instruction provided for students in special education, since their learning needs are being addressed as well. Finally, students in general education are also learning tolerance and patience toward their fellow students who are receiving special education services.

“Some of the C students have a chance to be a leader in a group, because they might be the best reader in the entire group of kids in an English lab.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Instruction schoolwide has improved as general education teachers learn strategies for teaching to reach students with disabilities.

Staff expend a great deal of effort in customizing the schedules of students in special education in order to meet their needs.

“...[F]rom a parent standpoint I think that they welcome the opportunity for their kids to fit in...being able to blend in with the rest of the students while they’re receiving the same type of help [as they got before the new model].”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

They have not experienced encroachment on general education funds for 5 years.

“If people want to go [toward] inclusion, a lot of times you’ll hear, ‘Well, there’s not enough money....’ But ultimately it ends up being cheaper...because the kids typically don’t stay in special ed[ucation] as long when you do inclusion. They’re unidentified quicker. And, you’re not identifying as many new kids because they’re getting support before they’re failing. The general ed[ucation] kids that would maybe would be referred [into special education] are getting services prior to referral...and [can] get back on track and be successful before that.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

A new appreciation for the skills of the special education staff has emerged.

“[B]efore, [general ed teachers thought], ‘Oh, special ed. They’ve got five kids in their room, how hard is that? And then they started getting the special ed kids in their classroom, and [realized], ‘Wow! You do a lot. You know a lot.’ So it’s given them [special ed teachers] that...status as the experts that they are.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Students who receive special education services participate to a much greater extent than they did previously in extracurricular and cocurricular activities.

Challenges

Many of the challenges the program has faced can be classified as resistance on the part of teaching staff, both general and special education.

“Special ed staff’s just as afraid of this as regular [education staff], if not more, because it’s a whole change in a role...it’s different work, and it’s hard work.”

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

The administration started the program with two of the special education teachers, then added a third and then ended at the full complement of 6 special education teachers providing support. When there were new special education staff hires, the district explained their model and how high a priority it was for new staff to work within it. The new approach was presented as part of the school's overall commitment to academic excellence, and as such became an accepted part of how the school did business.

"It's successful for all of our students because it's just best practice of teaching and instruction."

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Success helped sell the model to other special education teaching staff.

"... [T]hey also saw our kids [students who received special education services] succeeding in the general ed classroom, and it was like, 'Okay, it works now, so we're coming on board.'"

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

General education instructional staff were resistant, too. When the administration started up the new model, they purposefully selected general education teachers with a history of successful informal collaboration with special education staff. Once early successes were apparent, the model was expanded.

"One reason why we've been successful is the turnover in staff... We have the newer ones coming on board as people retire out, and that helps because they're more receptive to fresher ideas and teaching techniques and more up to date on things."

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Parents also occasionally express concerns about the school's approach, though this usually happens before they have directly experienced it. Once parents understand that inclusion usually benefits their children, that resistance is overcome. The success of the children in the program, and the personalized and flexible approach that special education staff take to meeting the needs of students, often removes initial parent resistance or concerns. The local advocacy community is very inclusion-oriented and is supportive of what the high school is doing, and once parents become aware that the school is aligned with advocates, it can help alleviate their concerns.

"The parents trust them because they know they are going to look out for their child."

-Interviewee, Sanger High School

Scaling Up

While there are no current plans to expand inclusion beyond its current implementation at the middle and high schools, the high school is seeking to add some improvements to its current programming.

Given the success of their reading remediation program (available to all students, including those in general education), they are considering adding universally available math remediation as well.

The administration believes strongly that they need an integrated vocational education program for all students, including those in special education, who may not wish to be college or diploma-bound. They have implemented a new vocational education program for non-diploma students this year.

The school has also created a schoolwide peer mentorship program, in which students in general education tutor and mentor those receiving special education.

How It Works: Two Students' Stories

“I remember when he was in elementary school. He was sixth grade coming to seventh grade, and I looked at his scores and I couldn't understand [why] he had never been even mainstreamed and I told him that he needed to be fully included. And they [school] said there was no way that was ever going to happen, it wasn't possible... We ... pushed the issue; he had never been outside a Special Day Class. He's a kid that is very severely autistic. [He is now fully included] and he's done even better at the high school... [H]is English teacher became very involved... and found out she had two girls in this particular boy's class who have... siblings that are autistic, and they asked, 'Can we work with him? We want to buddy up with him and support him in class.'”

“...A teacher I was working with in English two years ago... had the senior students write a final essay, and she brought me a copy. And one boy wrote about how when he was in elementary, RSP meant Really Stupid People. And he lived with that all the way through [his school career]. And then in his senior essay, he wrote that he realized now, through inclusion and us pushing, and everybody believing in him, that RSP meant Really Smart People. And he graduated. He has a job. He's working and he's doing great.”

Interviewee, Sanger High School