

## **RINCON MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE**

### ***Introduction***

Rincon Middle School is located in the suburban community of Escondido in northern San Diego County. It is one of five middle schools in the K-8 Escondido Union School District, and enrolls over 1400 students. The school first received a Leadership award through CalSTAT in 1999, and was recognized again in 2005 for its work in collaboration. Ten percent of its students receive special education services; 23% are considered English Language Learners, and 44% are in the Free and Reduced Price Meal program.

### ***The Impetus for Change***

Rincon had always included students receiving resource support in its general education classes, and in 1997 began including students from Special Day Classes. Its path toward full inclusion, however, was not necessarily a direct or easy one.

The school's turning point came at its annual awards assembly in 1996, when students from the Special Day program were jeered by students from the general education population when being presented with awards. The school had invited guests to the assembly who were knowledgeable about progressive inclusion practices and who were also parents considering placing their children in the school. Teachers and administrators were embarrassed by the students' behavior and began from that day to search for ways to create new practices and a new culture at the school.

*“‘It was awful’...the principal said... ‘I will never go through another assembly like that.’”*

*--Interviewee, Rincon Middle School*

The district director of special education became involved and initiated discussions on inclusion approaches with the school principal, a special education teacher, and a local expert from California State University at San Marcos. They believed that the way to create a new culture was to move the school toward full inclusion of students in Special Day Classes. To that end, the school assembled a team to observe schools in Vermont, which operated under an inclusion model. They returned with some specific ideas and began a year-long planning process to create a model that would work at their school.

The planning process was voluntary, with general and special education teachers and school and district administrators meeting weekly in the early mornings before school started. In the 1997 school year, implementation began.

### ***Rincon Middle School's Model***

The heart of Rincon's model is teaming its general and special education teachers to teach in classes with blended student populations that include students in general and special education. The approach emerged as a hybrid of observations from the Vermont inclusion model and ideas from "Caught in the Middle."

Rincon's teaming occurs both in the classroom, where resource and special day teachers and assistants co-teach with general education teachers, and in weekly collaborative planning for student progress and placement.

- **In the Classroom**

All students, including those receiving special education, receive ability-grouped instruction in math and language arts. Students in special education are included in grade-level social studies and science general education classes.

Special education teachers or aides are in all general education classrooms in which student populations are blended, assisting in teaching, providing small group instruction, and also working outside of class to provide and plan for adaptations, modifications, and instructional strategies.

The school has maintained Special Day Classes for some students who need a more contained environment and also will pull out children from general education classes who need intensive remediation. The pullout classes are provided universally to students in need of them, whether the students are in general or special education.

- **Collaborative Planning**

Teams of general and special education teachers and site administration (the assistant principal) meet weekly during a common prep time to plan for the 150-180 students for whom they are responsible. The "interdisciplinary team," as it is called, uses this time to discuss any student concerns, including academic progress, grades, and any needed interventions for individual students. This is also a time that special and general education teachers can coordinate any adaptations or modifications needed for students in the general education classrooms. The team follows a protocol for increasingly intensive interventions if those are needed for any individual student, and will refer a student for formal special education assessment only after all solutions under that protocol are pursued. Leaders of those teams also meet with the principal monthly to review curriculum and standards. The interdisciplinary team members all attend IEP meetings for students in their classes.

Planning for the school year begins in the spring when the staff looks ahead to predict the numbers and specific needs of their special and general education population. That information is used to arrange the master schedule. Orientation is also held in the spring and fall with incoming students and parents.

- Reading and Math Support

The school makes full use of research-based reading interventions, including High Point and Read Naturally. Math support is also provided as an elective during the school day for students who are a year or more below grade level; study skills are also offered as an in-school elective. Most academic teachers volunteer for at least one day weekly of homework support to any student who needs it.

- Staff Development

Staff development is ongoing and takes place during teacher release days. New hires are asked in the interview process about their experience with and openness to inclusion strategies. In the 2005-6 school year, staff received training in differentiation, student assets, and vocabulary development.

- Behavior Support

The school has recently adopted Positive Action, a schoolwide behavior support model. Students now participate in an Honor Level System earning positive rewards for good behavior. Troubling behaviors are handled on a graduated discipline system.

### *How They Did It*

#### **Planning**

The school's planning process began in 1997 when a team consisting of the principal, a parent, a California State University at San Marcos professor, and special and general education teachers made a week-long visit to Vermont. The team spent an intensive week visiting with experts at the University of Vermont, attending workshops on inclusion, and visiting inclusion schools.

Upon returning, the team scheduled a series of school planning meetings. Over the course of the school year the special education staff began by meeting weekly to discuss their new roles in an inclusion environment. Later, they began monthly meetings with general education teachers to educate them about inclusion and address their concerns. All of these meetings were held on Thursday mornings for forty-five minutes prior to the start of the school. Only the school's paraprofessionals were paid for the extra time committed to the planning process. The plan was ultimately developed in-house by the school's staff with only the assistance of the California State University professor.

The direct cost of the planning process to the school and district included only the cost of paraprofessional time since all other planning participants donated their time. The two additional cost items of significance were the fact-finding visit to Vermont and the assistance of the expert from California State University at San Marcos, who received a consultant fee for providing technical assistance to the planning team.

## **Ongoing**

With few exceptions the school has moved to a full inclusion model. The school has retained two Special Day Classes, one for students who are Severely Handicapped/Medically Fragile and another for severely autistic students. All blended general education courses such as mathematics, English/language arts, science and social studies are taught by teams consisting of a general education teacher and either a special education teacher or a special education assistant.

## *Staff*

General and special education teachers work collaboratively to serve all students in the school. To support the inclusion model, the work environment of the special education teachers, particularly those serving Special Day Class students, has changed from pull-out or separate classrooms to supporting students in the general education classroom. Students in the English/language arts and mathematics classes are grouped by ability. Those students who need additional help with math may have a second period of math support in lieu of an elective class. In math support, teachers work with small groups of students on the core curriculum to pre-teach or re-teach concepts and assist with homework. These classes are open to all students. Finally, there are still many pull-out rooms where students are pulled out of the general education classroom for intensive small group or one-on-one instruction. Over the course of the day the school's special education teachers work with general education teachers in teams with all students across all content areas.

A typical day for the school's five special education teachers consists of the following:

- One period of general education team teaching in math or English/language arts with ability grouping.
- One period of math support class for general or special education students in need of additional help.
- One period of science for students in need of additional help.
- One period of humanities.
- One or two periods of more intensive intervention for very low performing students.

- One period for common planning and preparation.
- A lunch period.

### *Time*

*Instructional Time.* To support its inclusion model the school's schedule now incorporates blocks of time for extra instructional time for all students who need additional help.

*After-school Program.* The school also offers an after-school program called Anytime School that is staffed by teachers and paraprofessionals and runs for an hour Monday-Wednesday. Anytime School is followed by an after-school program called X-Track, which runs until 6 p.m. X-Track is an extension of the Boys' & Girls' Club of Escondido. It is a free program for registered students. Homework help, sports, snacks, and adult supervision is provided. Some of the school's teachers contribute time to the after-school program without pay.

*Collaboration Time.* General and special education teacher teams, who along with the assistant principal form Interdisciplinary Teams, share a weekly common planning period. During this time the teams discuss individual student needs and propose interventions and modifications where appropriate.

The school also provides Thursday early release days for department collaboration time. Students are dismissed early to give staff an extra hour of department collaboration time.

### *Other Resources*

Since the school does not qualify for federal Title I funds it has limited discretionary funding. The district has provided funding for several intervention programs such as Read Naturally and High Point, and the school uses its CalSTAT grant money to pay for staff for the Anytime School after-school program.

### *Results*

Test scores for students in Special Day Classes have gone up as well as for the student population as a whole.

Negative behavior for students in Special Day Classes has also decreased. For the school as a whole, data from the last three years show that suspensions have decreased. Teachers attribute this mainly to the higher academic and behavioral expectations placed on all students in the classroom.

Teachers now feel responsible for all the students on their roster regardless of label; there is universal ownership and accountability for all the children in a grade level.

*"They're our kids."*

*--Interviewee, Rincon Middle School*

In addition to improving outcomes for students, the approach has resulted in budget savings for the school. With the steep decline in referrals into special education and caseloads the district has reduced the number of special education teachers at the school from seven to five.

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

The school, which has been designated a National Blue Ribbon School, attributes its success to:

- Strong leadership from both district and school administrators. They developed a powerful vision and continued to support it over time.
- Stability in school and district leadership. The previous school principal's tenure was nearly four years and that of the previous district's Director of Special Education more than thirty years. Our current principal started at Rincon as a teacher and returned 2 years ago as our principal. The current Assistant Superintendent of Special Education was our program specialist for many years.
- The administration's success in gaining the trust of the staff, fostering a willingness to take risks.
- Creating an environment where inclusion has become the norm, a part of the school's culture.

*"They said we're going to do this and they supported it long enough to where it became part of who we are."*

*--Interviewee, Rincon Middle School*

### ***Challenges***

Overcrowding in the school makes it difficult to flex the schedule as much as teachers might wish in order to customize instruction even further. The school was originally built for 1200 children and there are over 1400 enrolled currently at Rincon.

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

The school is working with the district to expand inclusion to other schools in the district and to help them become involved with the CalSTAT program.

***How It Works: Two Stories***

*“The original bad boy – we have him. He has to go get the boy from the medically fragile class (who’s in a wheelchair and who talks with a switch), wheel him over to his math class, sit with him and takes care of him and helps him with his work. His behaviors have gone down. We found out when you take your behavior kids and you put them in an area of responsibility their behaviors go down.”*

*--Interviewee, Rincon Middle School*

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*“Your high achieving kids and your Day kids, that are just brilliant, brilliant, brilliant, set a special ed kid beside them and say, ‘Here—you’re partnered.’ [The student may say] ‘I’m not going to do all the work.’ [and we say] ‘Nobody asked you to do all the work, but you’ve got to make sure they get the work done.’ It teaches them kindness and compassion.”*

*--Interviewee, Rincon Middle School*