

SEQUOIA MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Sequoia Middle School serves more than 800 students in grades 6 through 8 in Pleasant Hill, a suburb in northern California's Contra Costa County. It is one of ten middle schools in the 35,000-student Mount Diablo Unified School District. Five percent of students at Sequoia receive special education services; 3% are English learners, and 15% participate in the free or reduced price meal program. It is a magnet school for the district and draws a diversity of students speaking over thirty languages. Sequoia had received a promising practices award from CalSTAT in 2006, and went on to receive a Leadership Site Award in 2007 in the core message area of Collaboration.

Impetus for Change

The school's collaborative program had its inception nine years ago with the creation of its Reading Academy, a single class held at the end of the school day into which all students in general education needing reading intervention of any kind were placed.

At the time the Academy was created, a traditional special education model, with pullout resource support and stand alone Special Day Classes, was in place. English language learners were not served separately from other students, since (with the exception of a couple of years in the recent past) Sequoia did not have a large enough English learner population to hold English Language Development (ELD) classes.

After its first year of operation, it took an additional two years for the Reading Academy to evolve to its current form, with leveling (according to assessed ability) and inclusion of students receiving resource support and those classified as English Learners occurring the second year. In its third year, all reading intervention classes were scheduled in the same period early in the school day to allow for movement of students among levels as proficiency improved. In addition, special education instructional assistants were brought into the intervention classrooms, and the Academy was renamed the Reading Lab.

In the fourth year of the Reading Lab, a mathematics intervention class modeled on the Reading Lab was instituted. The expansion of intervention was driven by an increasingly intensive focus on standards, as well as the concerns of teachers and administrators about curriculum coverage for students who were not in general education classrooms.

At that time, a teacher who was serving both as Vice Principal for Student Services, and as the chair of mathematics, made a regular practice of observing resource classes. In accordance with Sequoia's traditional model, students receiving resource support received instruction separately from students in general education for math, history, reading, and English. For other subjects, those students joined others in general education. As a math teacher and chair of the department, the teacher realized how little grade-level math content students were covering in their resource classes. She began to advocate for change.

"I was absolutely appalled at the low level [at which] the special ed students were receiving instruction. They were not even given the grade level textbooks... There's no way they would ever, ever come up to grade level."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

After another two years of holding intervention classes in reading and math, the administration began the process of creating collaborative classrooms in which students in both general and special education were taught by a combination team of general and special educators in core English and math classes.

"It started out as strictly intervention in Math Lab and Language Arts Lab. And then it turned into the whole collaborative, and it changed the entire culture of the school."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Sequoia Middle School's Model

The creation of collaborative classrooms about three years ago marked the evolution of Sequoia's model to its current form. (A final element, the creation of a Learning Center, occurred about a year ago.) The implementation of the various elements in the program was incremental and took place over a period of several years. Even today, there are some classrooms at Sequoia in which students receive only general education services. However, though it took time and there have been challenges with implementation, teachers and administrators have been successful in creating a cohesive culture of collaboration at the school.

Characteristics of Sequoia's collaborative model as it exists today include:

- *Language Arts and Math Intervention*

Intervention classes (language arts and math labs as described earlier) are available to any student and are taught by teams of general and special educators. Students are placed in classes according to level of ability.

"We call the first day of class in Language Arts Lab 'the body swap'... [we] start shuffling bodies and people... where they need to be placed, so we can get them into the right classes."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Placement is fluid and can change at any time during the school year, based on assessed student performance and need. The concurrent scheduling of the labs allows for student movement among levels without disruption.

Homework Club is available after school on a voluntary basis to support students in completing homework in any subject area.

- *Data-driven Decision-making*

Placement in intervention classes is guided by assessments (both formal and informal) and by scores on standardized tests. The middle school articulates with elementary schools for students with IEP's and uses data from these meetings to assist with placement.

"We've tried our best...to get to the kids before the school year starts to get them in a place where they can be successful and they can get some help."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

As part of the articulation process, the school finds it needs to provide encouragement and support to parents whose children have always been educated in traditional special education settings.

"One thing that goes into it...especially in 6th grade IEP's, is you have to sort of ratchet up the parental expectations a lot...It's almost like the kids come here, and the parents are convinced that their kids will never make it...You find yourself telling the parents...'No, actually, he doesn't need these...crutches...he can do it.' Of course, it doesn't go for all students, but I've seen quite a few - they suddenly start to flourish."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Administrators closely track at-risk students and review their academic progress with teachers of core and intervention classes.

- *Team Teaching and Differentiated Instruction*

In collaborative English and math classrooms, teams of special and general educators teach the core curriculum to a blended population of students in general and special education. Team teaching strategies include supportive, parallel, and complimentary teaching. Instructional assistants are treated as key members of the team; both members of the teaching team have their names on the class rosters, although this required changes in recordkeeping procedures at the district.

"...It's a psychological thing. If students see both teachers' names on their schedule, they view both teachers equally. And both teachers' names are on the doors; both teachers are there for the back to school night, so it's a total collaborative throughout the whole system."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

- *Learning Center*

The most recent element of Sequoia's model is the creation of a learning center, where small groups of students can go for more intensive problem solving or support during class time if needed. The learning center is staffed for five (of eight) periods a day, every other day. Learning center staff have taught or assisted with the core curriculum, and therefore are well-suited to help students with assignments.

"[The students] feel pretty much at ease, and they can get their work done, and know that we're there to help them if they need that."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

- *Collaborative Planning*

Teachers have a dedicated weekly time for collaborative planning in addition to other common prep and staff development activities.

A "Care Team," comprised of IEP case managers, the school psychologist and administrators, also meets weekly to address concerns about students.

- *Supportive District and Site Administration*

The district has shown its support for the collaborative approach and encourages the education of children in special education in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

At the site, the schedule is built around the intervention and collaborative classrooms' needs, to make sure that supports are in place for students, and to ensure planning time for teacher teams.

The school board supported the creation of an "A" period (an instructional period early in the morning, immediately prior to the start of school) to provide an elective for students who, due to their enrollment in intervention classes, had lost their elective period.

"That starts at 7:15 in the morning and goes to 8:00 when the regular school day starts...It is just jam-packed with kids, that are getting an elective that they wouldn't have otherwise....They're here at 7 in the morning waiting for the teacher."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Finally, when interviewing candidates for positions at the school, the administration seeks individuals with experience or interest in collaborative inclusion as a requirement.

- *Positive Behavioral Support*

Teachers pay attention to positive behavior with "Pat on the Back" recognition tokens, turned in for a weekly drawing for prizes, and by routinely sending postcards home with good news about students' behavior or achievement.

How They Did It

Sequoia has taken an innovative approach to reconfiguring the work of its special education staff and its schedule to make its collaboration approach possible. Where additional funds are needed, the school has aggressively pursued opportunities provided by the district or through local grant-making organizations.

Planning

Sequoia took a relatively slow and deliberate approach to adopting their collaboration model. The first step, the Reading Academy established nine years ago, included three English teachers. The concept was allowed to expand and evolve slowly as other staff began to recognize its benefits.

Over the next several years the program was expanded to include ELD and resource students along with the general education students served by the program. In the fourth year, the Math Lab was added to serve students in all grades, and the school began moving toward a full inclusion model with the mainstreaming of science, physical education and elective classes. Math and English collaborative core classes have been implemented for the last four years.

In the early years of planning and implementation, planning was ad hoc and typically conducted on teachers' own time before or after school. The model was developed in-house, relying on the experience and expertise of the school's staff rather than outside experts.

Later, as the approach expanded and became more formalized throughout the school, time for planning and evaluation was built into the school's schedule.

Ongoing

Although the approach encountered some growing pains in the early years it has since changed the culture of the school and created support for the full inclusion model practiced at the school today. As the approach evolved over time it has changed the way the school delivers services to its students, organizes its staff and schedules its instructional time.

Staff

Prior to adopting its collaboration approach the school utilized traditional pull-out classes for resource students and separate special day classes for students with more severe disabilities. Under the new approach, special education teachers team teach with general education teachers in mainstreamed classrooms. General education teachers, along with paraprofessionals, teach the intervention classes (Language Arts and Math Labs).

The school's paraprofessionals are all trained in the intervention curricula used in the school, such as Step Up to Writing. The paraprofessionals who used to support special education teachers in pull-out classes now work with students in the collaboration classrooms. Special education teachers still maintain caseloads and have a daily period for conducting assessments and working on paperwork. A typical six-period day for the special education teachers consists of:

- One period of teaching a 6th grade general education collaboration class
- One period of teaching a 7th grade general education collaboration class
- Two periods of teaching 8th grade general education collaboration classes
- One period for testing and paperwork
- One planning period

Time

Sequoia schedules instructional time very differently from the way it did under its old, traditional pull-out model. Rather than having two parallel programs running throughout the day, one general and the other special education, services are now integrated so that nearly all students receive instruction in the core curriculum in collaborative general education classrooms. A menu of intervention programs is available to all students needing additional help, whether they are general education, special education or ELD. These include the Language Arts and Math Lab classes, the Learning Center and the Homework Club held after school. The school schedule is built around collaboration, with the collaboration classes receiving priority in scheduling and Reading and Math Lab classes scheduled so that students may migrate across ability levels as they progress.

Because students needing extra help attend the Reading and Math Lab classes during their elective periods, the school added the "A" period for electives before the start of the regular school day so that these students would have an opportunity to access some of the elective classes offered by the school.

Time for teachers to collaborate has also been built into the schedule in recent years. By adding 15 minutes to the school day four days per week, the school is able to release students early on Wednesdays to provide common planning time for an hour in the afternoon. The school has also used a 20 minute period of sustained, silent reading supervised by administrative staff to release teachers for collaboration.

Other Resources

Because the school does not qualify for federal Title I funding, they have paid for the extra costs associated with their collaboration approach by either reallocating their existing resources or by proactively pursuing grant funding opportunities. While these grant dollars allow the school to offer services they could not otherwise afford using only their general fund budget, the school's staff must constantly seek out new sources as existing grants expire.

Homework Club. The school offers an after school Homework Club that supports all students in all subjects on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday from 2:45 to 3:45. The teachers who work in after school program are paid an additional stipend for their time. The program is paid for through grant funding.

The school's students may also participate in a district-run after school program that serves students who are two or more grade levels behind in math. This program meets two days per week for twelve weeks from 2:45-4:15. However, this program has had limited success because no transportation home is provided and many of the school's students travel long distances and their parents cannot afford to transport them on their own.

Professional Development. In addition to the collaboration time available within the school's schedule, the school and district provide a number of other opportunities for engaging in professional development. The district pays for three district-wide early release days during the school year, when students are dismissed at 12:30, to release teachers for professional development. Schools must apply for this time by submitting a proposal to the district office describing how the time will be used to enhance teachers' professional skills. In 2007 the school initiated monthly grade level meetings for all staff which include a professional development component. Teachers also collaborate monthly for department and whole staff meetings.

For most training, the school uses a train-the-trainer model where one or two teachers are trained externally, who then train the remainder of the staff on site.

CalSTAT Grant. The school used its \$5,000 grant to pay for most of its external professional development. Unless other funding can be secured, the staff fears that professional development activities may have to be scaled back once they are no longer eligible for grants. The staff has also found participation in the state and regional institutes to be very helpful.

Materials. The school has found that it spends more for instructional materials under the collaboration approach, primarily due to having to purchase a range of materials to support the leveled Math and Language Arts Lab classes. Funding for these materials comes largely from grants the school applies for from the district or from local organizations such as the Pleasant Hill Community Foundation. These grants are typically for small amounts in the range of \$500 to \$1,000. The total amount of grant funding raised by the school each year varies, ranging up to \$5,000, but averaging about \$2,000 per year.

Site-Based Funds. The school receives a small amount of site-based funds that it uses to pay for a part-time intern school psychologist and a part-time technology person. Any money that may be left over is used for professional development.

Results

The implementation of collaborative inclusion at Sequoia has resulted in a shift in the school's culture.

Teachers throughout the school accept the usefulness of a collaborative approach, though not all teachers are team teaching in a collaborative classroom.

Students in collaborative classrooms appreciate the help from their two teachers, and usually cannot identify students receiving special education.

"That's where we realized the culture had changed so much. They just accept now that there are some classrooms that have two teachers, and some classrooms that have one, and they don't think twice about it."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

"...After two years...at this point no one can identify [students with special needs]. Kids don't know who's who...They're all just equal mixed together, and they don't care."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Teachers in the collaborative classrooms have changed their teaching methods over time, noting that materials they prepared separately for students with special needs were helpful to students in general education as well.

"I used to...hand out individualized [packets] to students in special education...I decided, 'Why don't I just give it to everybody,' and that way everybody is being helped...It's been a big change mindset-wise for me."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

In the same way that special education strategies have moved into general education teachers' repertoire, research-based interventions have also moved out of special education classrooms into universal use, supporting mixed populations of students in both core and intervention classes. For example, **Step Up to Writing**, an intervention curriculum for writing formerly used only in special education at Sequoia, is now used in most classrooms, beginning with the collaborative classrooms and then moving, when teachers saw the results, into traditional general education classrooms.

"In English, you're more inclined [as a special education teacher] to use extra graphic organizers, more outlines, break things down into more small pieces, shorten assignments. But it works well for everybody...it's just a case of explaining it better."

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Teachers believe that the desire to fit in socially with their peers has motivated many students receiving special education toward increased academic achievement.

“They’d rather blend in with the general population. We had prepared a handout for [a 6th-grader who was in special education] and he just said, ‘No. I don’t want it. I’ll see if I can do it without.’ And so he’s been doing it very successfully.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Some students in special education do need modified assignments, however, and teachers are prepared to provide them when necessary.

The increased academic achievement has appeared in CST scores, with the percent of students in special education at proficiency or above increasing from 8.9% to 30% in the current year.

Teachers also witness dramatic improvements in skill levels in students participating in labs.

“We’ve had some 8th graders...who, when they came into [the school and the Language Arts Lab] at the beginning of the year, they wouldn’t even write a sentence. And by the end of the year they were writing multiple paragraphs.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Students are helping each other more. Teachers encourage peer assistance but it appears spontaneously as well.

Attendance for children in special education has improved.

“Absenteeism among special ed and resource kids had always been very high...Once we created the collaborative model, that’s begun to come down...They’re coming to school.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Teacher attendance at IEP’s is consistent, with the IEP serving as an extension of the collaborative planning that routinely occurs around student need.

“We had much more of an impact with ELD students in our Language Arts lab”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Students in need of English language development are benefitting from their attendance at the Language Arts Lab.

And students with academic challenges in one area and strengths in another have a greater opportunity to build on those strengths.

“Just because you’re in special ed doesn’t mean you don’t have certain strengths. Being stuck in an SDC class all day long, you may never have the opportunity to showcase those strengths...It’s the 6th grader who probably can’t read [well] but is great in math.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Reasons for Success

The school’s principal attributes the successful implementation of their approach to the “phenomenal” staff working at the school. By moderating the pace of change at the school and allowing teachers to become involved on a voluntary basis she avoided the potential for backlash against the initiative. Overall the school has made a firm commitment to inclusion and collaboration.

Challenges

The strongest challenges to Sequoia’s program appeared when collaborative classrooms were first created three to four years ago. Teachers and parents alike were unhappy with the collaborative inclusion model, which had been initiated by the principal.

“The first year we went to the collaborative model, I’d say the teachers were almost wanting to lynch me as much as the parents [did]...and I was the one that implemented it...”

-Principal, Sequoia Middle School

Some teachers trained in special education, and placed in formerly general education classrooms, found early on that their skills were not fully utilized.

“In the beginning, it was horrible...You pretty much sat around in the classroom as the second adult in the room. The second year was much better.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

As part of the school’s cultural shift, this challenge has been largely overcome.

“We’ve made progress since that first year...every year the teachers become more used to the idea...I’ve found the teachers over time being much more open to suggestions...and letting us take over parts of the class.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

In addition, the resistance of school staff to a new model has been transformed gradually to acceptance and then cooperation.

“I don’t want people to think that this just happens overnight. It has been a very long road, and only recently does it feel like it’s running...I think we are [now, after seven years] a very cohesive group...As a staff, we really look out for one another and work together to really meet those kids’ needs.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Parent concerns centered on the disappearance of smaller dedicated resource classes for their children who were receiving special education services. Parents of students in general education were concerned about the quality and level of education their children would receive in a class inclusive of children with special needs. As students experienced success within the model, parent concerns were ameliorated. Teachers also found in early implementation that they needed more time to plan for collaboration than they had in their schedules. At first, administrators would cover classes on a rotating basis to allow ad hoc planning as needed. This proved to be a good start but not sufficient. At the teachers' request, the site was able to implement changes in the schedule to allow dedicated planning time. This has been an enormous help in full implementation, though time availability continues to be an issue.

Money as well as time continues to be an issue. The principal has been creative and supportive in finding solutions to acquiring needed materials and other resources, but this year the district is facing a budget shortfall.

“The hardest thing right now...is that we’re losing two of our team members because of budget cuts... We’re afraid of what’s going to happen to programs like this if the budgets get axed.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

Next Steps and Scaling Up

Although budget realities may require a scaling back, those teaching under this model see some areas where expansion would be ideal, such as applying its methods to social studies and science classes.

A more careful focus on learning responses to teaching and various interventions will bring the school closer to tracking responses to intervention, and the principal would like to see that happen in the future.

“As a school, which deals with education and children, we are constantly having to face change. And when you look at change and how you accept it and how you respond to it, that is a gauge of the maturity of an organization...Are the systems in place so we can react, or--even better--anticipate change?”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School

How It Works: One Student's Story

“[He] is one of our success stories. He came up to me about three weeks ago, when there were progress reports for students who needed some extra support. He said, ‘I want one of those.’ I said, ‘Well, you don’t need to have a progress report.’ He said, ‘Yeah, but I want to show off for my mom how good I’m doing. So if I can have all my teachers fill out how good I’m doing, I can show off to Mom.’...So now we do progress reports for [him] because he wants them...It was a change of culture there too.

In the 6th grade he was not interested in school. He wasn’t really concerned that he was not being successful. And I was really, really worried about him - really looking at him for retention. But thankfully, we decided to put him in the 7th grade, and something happened. He’s completely changed...He’s interested in school; he’s involved...he’s seeing the relevance here.”

“...We had a social studies assignment and we were doing a discussion...and he’s trying so hard...He always had trouble catching [up]...but on that day, he knew what he was talking about and he was so pumped. And the whole class just spontaneously broke into applause...because it was his successful moment and the kids recognized this.”

-Interviewee, Sequoia Middle School