

**SPRING VIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL
TITAN ACADEMY
LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE**

Introduction

Spring View Middle School serves about 700 7th and 8th grade students in the suburban town of Rocklin in Placer County. Twelve percent of the school's students receive special education services; 4% are classified as English learners, and 20% participate in the free/reduced price meal program. Spring View is the district site for providing an Independent Living Skills (ILS) program for middle school-age students with severe cognitive disabilities.

In Spring View's academy model, students are grouped into small learning communities, with teachers teamed within academies to provide instruction in the core curriculum. Titan Academy at Spring View received a CalSTAT award for the core message area of Collaboration. At this academy, characterized by a collaborative inclusion model, 156 8th-grade students were enrolled in 2006, of which 31 were receiving special education (RSP, SDC or ILS) services.

Impetus for Change

At the request of the administration, a team of teachers attended a CalSTAT technical assistance conference three and a half years ago (2004) as part of their staff development that year. The team was comprised of one teacher from general education and another from special education.

Although the teachers were unfamiliar with the material on collaborative inclusion that was presented at the conference, they returned with enough new ideas to begin reflecting on inclusion and intervention practices at Titan Academy. Collaboration and co-teaching were firmly in place at the Academy but the teachers saw room for change in how students in special education were included in general education classrooms.

"It started this wonderful conversation about how to bring them into the school community in a much more meaningful way."

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Up until then, students in special education attended their own academy at Spring View, with occasional push-in to other academies, and pull-out from Titan for resource support. The independent bell schedules of each of the academies made it difficult even for this level of inclusion.

“That was one of the things...we wanted to rectify - was [to] find a way to facilitate mainstreaming for those students, because it was a struggle.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

The teachers who had attended the CalSTAT conference proposed a new approach for Titan Academy based on what they had learned. The principal

“We weren’t doing what we consider true real valuable inclusion, and making it not just academic inclusion, but that self-esteem piece.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

gave permission to proceed, and staff at the school was given the option to decide whether to participate. The goal was to create a “response to intervention” (RTI) model with strong interventions and documented response, while continuing to build community in the way that was the hallmark of Spring View’s academies.

The School’s Model

Titan Academy chose to implement its model incrementally, and began by creating math and reading intervention classes that were tiered according to ability, and open to students in both general and special education. While a schoolwide daily reading period was already in place, Titan wanted to change what was taught during that time to make it more relevant for struggling readers.

Scheduling to make room for reading and math intervention and enrichment during the school day proved to be one of the early challenges, which Titan met by introducing block scheduling for days that interventions were available. They began with two days per week in which interventions were scheduled, and were eventually able to schedule them four days per week.

The roles of special and general educators changed under the new approach. Teachers from the stand-alone special education academy moved over to Titan in order to co-teach intervention and other classes, although their time was not exclusively dedicated to Titan. They continued to hold IEP caseloads and to teach traditional classes for special education students who were not in Titan Academy. All general education teachers began team teaching in inclusive classrooms; the Language Arts general education teacher taught the math intervention class. Once per quarter, general and special educators switched classrooms and roles to increase their skills in co-teaching and collaboration.

The core curriculum is now taught by teams of special and general educators, in classrooms with combined populations of students from special and general education.

“We’re all teaching together, and these are all our kids, and we’re all addressing the issues in order for them to meet their academic goals.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Placement in intervention classes is fluid and can change at any time during the school year. Students are placed in interventions based on assessed ability and not because of participation in special education; intervention classes are universally available to Academy students and are comprised of students from both general and special education.

“On Tuesday if we need to make a move, we’re going to make a move...it’s all based on the needs of that student...if a kid is struggling, we’re going to address it and make sure that they have the supports in place for them to be successful.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Titan decided to address the social aspect of inclusion in a number of ways. There was already a schoolwide program in place whereby students in general education could use their elective to serve as a peer mentor to a student in special education. In addition, Titan continued its Academy practice of including students from the Independent Living Skills program in homeroom in the mornings. In addition, teachers include student teambuilding for students all year.

“In Titan Academy, the community that we have fostered is that all students are accepted; all students are included in the program. All students...take part in what we’re doing...and we all depend on each other.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

In the course of planning for implementation, teachers realized that they needed time to plan and collaborate during the school year. The administration also arranged for release days for teachers to plan in the summer prior to the first year of implementation, and teachers will ask for the time again in the summer of 2008. On Mondays and Thursdays, common prep and planning periods have been set aside for reviewing individual student data, planning curriculum and co-teaching activities, and making placement decisions. Data from student assessments, including algebra readiness tests, CST scores, reading assessments and teacher observations are considered at the collaborative meetings. These meetings are in addition to schoolwide data committee meetings, at which teams review data from DataWise, a proprietary database used at Spring View for reviewing test results and grades.

Spring View has implemented positive behavioral supports based on the model found in “Time to Teach: Empowerment and Excellence in Every Classroom” (Dahlgreen, Hyatt and Dobbins). Students can earn tickets for academic and behavioral excellence and can enter drawings for prizes with them; they are recognized at school assemblies for positive contributions.

The strong interpersonal connections among the teaching staff, while not a formal part of the Titan model, smooth the way for co-teaching and collaboration.

How They Did It

Much of the success that Spring View has experienced with its model is a result of making more strategic use of its staff and instructional time. However, the school also benefits from the additional discretionary dollars it receives as a Title I school and from supplemental financial support from the district.

Planning

Based on what the team had learned at the CalSTAT conference, the school began a planning process that was teacher-led. One of the strengths of Spring Views model is that it had the support of the school's teachers from the beginning.

In 2004, the first year of planning, the teacher team was given four to five days of release time, plus two days in the summer, to undertake research into RTI and collaboration strategies that could be incorporated into the school's new model. The funds to pay for this release time came from the school's site budget. There were no other costs associated with the planning process; all of the work was conducted in-house by the teaching staff.

Following the year of planning, the school began implementation in 2005. The school started the year collaborating in both language arts and math, but soon realized that attempting a new implementation in both subjects was too taxing on the teaching staff, particularly the special education teachers who were teaching intervention classes while also maintaining student case loads. They scaled back to collaborating on language arts only and reintroduced math the following year.

Ongoing

Titan was successful in making the change to a collaborative model by being creative in the way that its teaching staff, both special and general education, approaches their work and in the way it organizes its school schedule.

Staff

The academy's programs and staff are now organized to serve students based on need rather than their status. Intervention programs are designed to support all students who need extra help, whether general education, special education, or ELL. Both general and special education teachers collaborate to teach core curriculum (language arts, math, science, and social studies) and intervention classes made up of students from the general education, special education and ELL populations. Special education teachers have received reduced caseloads, from thirty to thirty-five students originally to twenty students now, to free up their time for collaboration.

Time

The school operates on a seven period day. The academies within the school are free to operate under a traditional or four period block schedule. Each teacher teaches the equivalent of five periods – the four core subjects plus a period of Accelerated Reader – along with one prep period and one advisory period. Both the prep and advisory periods are common for the academy team and provide time for collaboration. Under the block schedule, the academy has the flexibility to combine blocks of time to provide additional intervention time in language arts or math for students that need the extra help.

During the advisory period, teachers may work with a small group of four to five students for review or re-teaching of core subject material, meet with parents, or write IEPs. The school schedules advisories, during an elective or physical education period to provide time when general and special education teachers do not have classroom teaching responsibilities.

The school makes time for its Accelerated Reader period by scheduling two lunch periods each day. Students alternate between lunch and Accelerated Reader, with half attending one during one period, and then switching places during the second.

The school also provides time for additional help outside of the standard student instructional day. Under the teachers' contract, teachers are required to be at school for thirty minutes before and after students are in school. The academy uses this time to for tutoring, with teachers taking turns to work with students. Teachers also voluntarily tutor students during the lunch period.

The school uses state intervention funds to provide the Homework Improvement Program, a forty-five minute support and tutorial program offered after school for students needing additional tutoring in math and language arts. The program is staffed by certified teachers.

Other Resources

The school is fortunate in that it qualifies for federal Title I funding, giving it additional discretionary resources. The school also benefits from site council funds and district pass-through dollars such as the state intervention funds. Further, because the district believes in the effectiveness of the model, it allocates four additional teacher positions to the school to support the academy model and to facilitate the scheduling of the common prep and advisory periods.

Professional Development. The school makes a significant investment in professional development. Money for this comes largely from the school's site funds, from district-sponsored activities, or through the County Office of Education.

Time for professional development is provided through two district-wide student-free professional development days each year and twelve minimum days held on Mondays, when students are released early. In addition to the common prep and advisory periods, departments meet for one hour per week. This time is made available by asking staff to arrive at school thirty minutes early, from 7:30-8 a.m., on one day for the meeting, then allowing them to leave at the bell on another day. Doing this two days per week gives each department an hour of shared meeting and planning time.

Most of the training taking place at the school is provided through the expertise of the school's staff, although they will occasionally bring in external trainers.

Materials. Adopting the collaboration model has not caused the academy to invest additional funds in instructional materials as it was already using curricula such as Accelerated Reader and Accelerated Math. What has changed is the degree to which these intervention strategies are integrated into the broader school program and made available to all students who require the additional work.

CalSTAT Grant. This is the third year that the school has received the CalSTAT grant. This money is used for purchasing hardware and software, sending staff to conferences such as the CalSTAT institutes and California Association of Middle Schools meetings. They also used the money to send a teacher team to observe a student behavior model at Bidwell Junior High School in Chico.

Results

Teachers find that special education classifications serve as a guide to levels of services, but not as hard and fast categories. At the same time, the rate of exit from special education has increased as student skill levels increase.

With co-teaching, students view all members of the teaching team as their teachers whether the teachers are general or special educators.

IEP's at Titan Academy are well attended, in contrast to those at other schools, since they are seen as an extension of the collaborative planning routinely done for students.

Behavior at the school level has improved with the shift to positive supports, with a reduction in referrals and suspensions, and a shift overall to a more positive behavioral climate.

"[We] really adopted this idea that we can spend a few minutes and intervene."

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Reasons for Success

Titan attributes the success of its collaboration model to several factors. First, it receives strong support from the school district in the form of additional funding for positions and programs. The principal also believes that the early success of the program has helped create greater teacher buy-in and support, leading to further success. Finally, the principal believes that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to successfully operate the model without the additional discretionary funding provided by Title I.

Challenges

In early implementation, teachers in general education needed help in designing appropriate inclusive activities. They were supported in this by special educators and by a commitment to persevere with different strategies until they identified those that best supported the students.

“We had not had a lot of contact with SDC [or] ILS...we would come up with an activity that we thought would be inclusive. Well, no, [it wasn’t]. [We asked], how do we address the issues of really meeting the needs of all the students? And making them...an integral part of the process rather than... [having them] just hand out the equipment?...So there were some uncomfortable moments.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

There also was not a math curriculum for middle school-level intervention when Titan initiated its math intervention class three years ago. Teachers had to design it on their own, and are currently in the process of researching curricula again to discover if any yet exist that have been tested and are suitable to their needs.

“I’m pretty much telling all my teachers, ‘Here’s what I see the kids need,’ but at the same time, I’m not the expert...I just feel it could be more effective, especially if we had a program that was proven.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Some teachers would like additional time for planning differentiated and tiered instructional strategies within classrooms with blended populations.

“It’s quite a job to plan your lesson...balancing equations in such a way that the kids who are borderline GATE and kids who are far below basic are all engaged and making progress...”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy

Titan also constantly works at developing and maintaining functional and collaborative teams. It can be difficult to get staff with varied backgrounds and personalities to mesh, particularly when there is staff turnover. In 2008 alone, the school hired seven new teachers. All had to be inducted into the academy’s programs and professional culture.

Finally, the school as a whole struggles with maintaining focus on all of the various issues that demands its attention. They find that it is easy to “drop the ball” on a continuing initiative when a new and pressing issue comes along.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

Titan Academy’s example has prompted other academies within Spring View to try some aspects of their inclusion approach, possibly because so much emphasis is being placed on intervention and RTI models. At articulation meetings at school and district levels, other academies and schools have taken note of Titan’s approach.

Titan administrators and teachers have been invited to present at the California League of Middle Schools on more than one occasion, and provide consultation and assistance on request to other schools seeking to implement similar programs.

The next subject at Titan that teachers would like to include in the collaborative inclusion model is science.

The school is interested in implementing a positive behavior and rewards program. It is currently examining the Renaissance Program for possible adoption.

The school as a whole is also working on improving parent involvement. One of the school’s teachers in developing a new program for her Masters in Educational Administration.

Finally, they are studying Robert Marzano’s top ten instructional strategies to determine how they may eventually be adopted at the school.

How It Works: One Student's Story

“This boy was in another academy at the start of the year, and in a different program, and was struggling. He wasn't coming to school; he was socially awkward to the point where kids were kind of uncomfortable around him...Of course, that affected his response to them...And so he moved from where he was in SDC to me, in Titan Academy...We spent several months getting the attendance issue settled. ‘You will come to school. When you are at school you will not go to the nurse; you will not go home. This is your place.’ ...We worked our way through that and now he's...in a different enrichment class...socially, he's much more comfortable ...Now you see him on campus and he's a totally different person. He's not withdrawn; he comes to school...Bringing him...into this academy and bringing him back into the group and making him a part of the community [showed him that]...it doesn't matter supposedly what you're labeled; we're going to make you successful no matter what...It's getting to the point where he's on grade level in his reading. He's on grade level in his math. And in two weeks he's probably going to get exited out of special education.”

-Interviewee, Titan Academy