

VALLEY VIEW MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP SITE PROFILE

Introduction

Valley View Middle School, located in Pleasant Hill in suburban Contra Costa County, has an enrollment of approximately 800 students in grades 6-8. Valley View is part of the Mount Diablo Unified School District, and is one of ten middle schools in the district. Twelve percent of the school's population is designated as special education; 15% are in the Free and Reduced Price Meal program, and 5% are English Language Learners. Valley View received a Leadership award in 2004 for collaboration.

The Impetus for Change

Prior to instituting collaboration, Valley View provided special education in a traditional model in which students were pulled out for resource support services and Special Day Classes were taught separately from those provided to students in general education. There was occasional informal collaboration, when general education teachers asked for assistance with students in their social studies and science classes who were also receiving resource support; generally, the assistance was for study skills, reteaching of content, or test preparation.

The resource teacher had long wanted more comprehensive and frequent communication with general education staff throughout the school year to better track the progress her students with IEP's were making throughout the year. Her past requests for closer collaboration and teaming with teachers in general education had not been approved. In the absence of a more formal process, she provided informal consultation on request to general education teachers for their students that needed support, whether or not they had an IEP.

The middle school found over time that their special education referrals were increasing, yet, when children referred were assessed, they were being found ineligible for special education services. Although many of the children were not meeting the criteria for special education, their parents and teachers knew that the children needed support to further their learning.

With the arrival of a new principal at the school, the resource teacher's proposal for increased collaboration was implemented. An eighth grade English teacher agreed to collaborate with the resource teacher to see if by working together students would be better served.

Staff from the school attended a CalSTAT Institute and began to hear how other sites were collaborating. They also visited other school sites. After considering many possible configurations and holding many conversations among staff and administration, they realized they wanted a place on campus for children - regardless of their IEP, 504, or English Learner status - to get academic and behavioral support. A learning center model seemed a good fit and was adopted. Other changes were introduced as well.

"After that first CalSTAT [Institute], we came back and a group of us had dinner at my house [W]e really had to start having hard, 'below the green line' conversations we had to look where could we maybe make an inroad."

-Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

Valley View's Model

At "Our Learning Center," students referred by their teachers can get small group instruction, take a make-up test, or access assignments modified to meet their needs. At first the center was staffed by special education teachers rotating through, giving up time with individual students to make sure the center was open. Then, the district was approached to provide funding. With that support, the center was staffed with a coordinator, who is a teaching assistant under the direction of the special education staff.

Other key elements of the changes at Valley View fall generally under the category of blended classes and team teaching. Not all classes or grades were changed over to this model at once, although now all classes are blended and team taught.

- Resource and general education teachers co-teach classes of students in general and special education. The exact method of teaming is left up to the individual teachers.
- Teachers volunteer for teaching blended classes. The first teaming took place in English language arts, then in science classes and social studies. Three years ago, 6th grade math was blended; as the students moved into 7th and then the 8th grades, each incoming math class was moved to the new model.

"We've always said administratively we need to go slow to make this happen."

-Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

Not all teachers have equally embraced the model, but the school has proceeded with staff that is willing to try the new process. Science teachers, for example, came to the idea slowly, but were convinced of the utility of the new approach through seeing its positive effects.

Retirement and turnover of teaching staff have also brought in staff familiar with and open to the collaborative model. The school has obtained an explicit agreement from staff that are less supportive of collaboration not to sabotage the work of those who are working within the model.

- An Assessment Planning Team meets weekly to discuss referrals to special education, IEP's, and related issues. A student review team meets weekly to discuss students behaviorally at risk, some of whom need academic support. The school has been able to take advantage of work time provided at CalSTAT institutes to plan collaborative planning and set longer-term program goals. In the last two years teachers have requested and been given two minimum days during the school year to do planning for collaboration. Staff meets weekly on Mondays for a rotating agenda of departmental meetings, faculty meetings and grade-level collaboration.
- The school has also complemented its learning center and team teaching with reading programs for all students: Accelerated Reader in 2005, and Language! in 2006. They offer reading and math intervention electives. Teachers will refer the students into the elective, and have found that these classes are popular with students. All students in need of intervention or support can access these classes.
- There is a great deal of effort expended in articulation with the elementary level: administrators meet with 5th grade staff to explain collaborative program; teachers attend IEP's of 5th grade students; and administrators as well as students meet with 5th grade students to discuss how collaboration works in 6th grade.
- When behavior problems at the school peaked in 2004, staff and administration decided to address school behavior through changing the school environment.

"It wasn't that the children were naughty. "The adults in their lives were inconsistent, and the kids knew who [they] could be late for, where [they] better be in their seat. "We were exhausted that year."

-Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

A schoolwide behavioral support program, BEST (Building Effective Schools Together) was selected, and was implemented the following year. BEST is still in the process of being adopted; a school committee meets monthly to ensure its full implementation. Staff has become more consistent with behavior approaches due to the use of the program.

- In the Leadership class, students in general education classes are “buddied” or matched up with students from Special Day Classes (SDC) for academic and social events.
- Students receiving special education resource support in 7th and 8th grades have at least one resource teacher with them who was with them the year before.
- The principal consults with teachers in setting up the master schedule to make sure the teachers’ needs in the collaborative model are met.

How They Did It

Planning

Planning for the collaboration approach began in 1999 with the arrival of a new principal at the school. A school planning team of 4-5 members was established consisting of the principal, special and general education teachers, and a paraprofessional. Direct costs to the school were minimal, but this was largely due to the contributions of personal time and money made by the planning team members.

The planning team conducted site visits to four schools in the area with collaboration models. However, the only cost to the school’s budget was for substitutes to cover teachers’ classes. Travel costs, consisting of mileage and meals, were paid out of pocket by the principal. Planning team meetings were held in the evening or on weekends on the team members’ own time. Again, the principal paid for any incidentals out of her own pocket.

Once the school began to formulate its plan, central office administrators in curriculum and instruction and special education provided support in identifying information resources and ensuring that the plan complied with state and federal regulations.

Ongoing

Valley View is not eligible for federal Title I funding, but does have a small amount of discretionary resources from site council funds, PTSA fundraising, and a CalSTAT Leadership grant awarded in 2005. The school refocused its resources to move from a traditional pull-out and SDC model to a model featuring full inclusion with a full-time Learning Center for providing extra support to students who are not meeting standards. This change required making use of school resources such as instructional staff and time differently.

Staff

Inclusion. Nearly all of the school's classrooms are now mainstreamed. SDC teachers teach 2-3 periods of reading/language arts and mathematics with students who are unable to work successfully in a general education classroom. Otherwise, science, social studies and elective classes are all inclusion. The school's six special education teachers support all students by teaming with general education teachers in general education classrooms, by helping to make instructional accommodations and modifications, and by teaching 1-2 periods per day of Academic Success Classes. Academic Success Classes are offered during elective periods and focus on study skills and re-teaching or pre-teaching concepts from students' general education classes. A typical day for a special education teacher at Valley View consists of:

- One to two periods of Academic Success Classes
- One period for planning and preparation
- Team teaching and consulting with general education teachers

Learning Center. The Learning Center is a resource room that supports all struggling students in all subjects. It is staffed throughout the day by a coordinator, who is a paraprofessional working under the direction of certified special education teacher. The Learning Center also makes use of peer tutors. Students attending the Learning Center are referred there by their general education teachers. For all or part of a general education class period the classroom teacher may send a student to the Learning Center with instructions describing the type of help the student needs, such as taking a make up test or receiving reading intervention. However, the Learning Center may not be used as a placement for students with behavioral issues. In addition to the coordinator, other costs of the Learning Center consist of computers, texts and other instructional materials.

Time

Instructional Time. The school operates on a seven period day consisting of core courses and electives. Under the collaboration model students who require intervention time are referred to an Academic Success Class taught by a special education teacher in lieu of an elective.

Collaboration Time. Collaboration time is at a premium at Valley View. Weekly staff meetings, which include time for collaboration, are held every Monday afternoon from 2:30-4 p.m. Teachers do not receive additional pay for this time (the teacher contract day ends at 2:30) because their contract calls for necessary and reasonable duties beyond the normal teaching day. For the past two years the school has had two minimum days, one each in November and March, when students were dismissed at 12:45 to provide teachers with additional time in the afternoon for planning and collaboration. Teachers also meet weekly in Assessment Planning Teams and Student Review Teams to discuss student achievement and behavior issues.

Other Resources

The school has few discretionary resources for supporting its collaboration approach. However, it has redirected the resources it currently has, including site council funds, PTSA and the CalSTAT grant, to strengthen collaboration at the school.

Intervention Programs. The school has invested in several reading intervention programs, including Accelerated Reader and Language! over the past three years. Valley View also began implementing the BEST positive discipline program in 2005. With the BEST program, a team of teachers, the school psychologist, the campus supervisor, and administrators meet monthly to plan BEST activities and to track the number of office referrals.

Professional Development. Much of the school's discretionary money is focused on staff development. In the past the school has brought in nationally recognized trainers for Accelerated Reader. Each year, \$2,000 to \$3,000 of site council funding is dedicated to conferences and training in collaboration.

The school's CalSTAT grant is an important source of funding for staff development, paying for the cost of staff development activities such as conference and workshop fees, and the costs of substitutes and stipends to provide teachers with the time to engage in staff development. Further, involvement as a CalSTAT Leadership Site has provided the school with a support network and has helped build support for collaboration among staff and parents.

However, Valley View feels it could do more if it had additional discretionary funding, specifically to reduce class sizes and to hire reading specialists to support the school's efforts in improving literacy instruction.

"[C]ollaboration has become part of the school's culture ... [B]ut, it would be even more effective if we could afford smaller class sizes and reading specialists to support the teachers."

--Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

Results

The test scores of students with disabilities' started to rise in math as soon as they instituted collaborative math classes; their levels of proficiency rose substantially in both math and English language arts in 2004-5. Valley View met its API and AYP goals in 2005, and staff attributes these successes to exposure to grade level curriculum, and differentiated instruction support provided to general education teachers by resource teachers.

"Anything that works for the resource students is going to work for every single student in the class."

-Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

They have also found that students referred into the intervention classes for reading or math, have increased their subject grades by two levels (from C's to B's, for example). Behavior issues have resolved for many students, particularly those in special education, because they know they are expected to be on task, and because they see that the assistance they need to be successful is there for them. This seems to be proceeding separately but in tandem with the effects of implementing BEST behavioral supports.

Staff has noticed a change in attitude toward students in special education.

"Now that the kids are blended in, the kids [in general education] have compassion. And that's what it's all about."

-Interviewee, Valley View Middle School

Reasons for Success

The school's success in implementing its collaboration model may be attributed to the following:

- Strong support from both district and school level administration in creating a vision for collaboration and supporting its development and implementation.
- Starting small and letting the approach build from the bottom up. In the early years of the approach only 2-3 teachers who were willing to take the risk volunteered to do collaboration. Once others saw the success that these demonstration classrooms achieved, along with the privileges these teachers received, such as recognition and additional resources, they became interested in collaborating as well.

Challenges

Valley View is working toward meeting No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements for Highly Qualified Teachers under its collaborative model. They are pursuing credentialing in order to meet NCLB goals in this area.

Students newly in general education classes out of Special Day Classes are used to more immediate attention, due to the lower ratios usually found in Special Day Classes. They have had to learn patience in a classroom setting with less personalized attention, but teachers observe that they have made some important gains: they are learning autonomy and initiative. For example, many are learning how to proceed to the next step or stage in a lesson without checking in with an adult.

Next Steps and Scaling Up

Valley View does not have plans to extend its model, but it is constantly expanding its collaborative offerings within the school. The school continues to work at meeting the needs of all students, particularly students from low income families, ethnic minorities, English language learners, and special education students.

Valley View is also exploring strategies for collecting more data and making greater use of data to guide instruction.

From a district perspective the hope is that collaboration will be adopted by more schools. All of the district's middle schools will be meeting in high school feeder groups to discuss adopting common collaboration strategies.