

Middle School

Promise

Award-Winning Schools Offer Models for Success

California public schools regularly find themselves searching for outside sources of funding to fill gaps left by budget crunches. In many schools, grant writing has become as much a reality for teachers and administrators as curriculum planning. However, for the five sites recently awarded the CalSTAT Leadership grant,* the refrain is different. Each of these schools has made tremendous strides toward creating a positive environment for students and staff, one that is conducive to learning and teaching and one that has yielded both anecdotal and statistical evidence of success—even while experiencing

funding challenges. Most importantly, each site has developed a model that is replicable, its success not simply an isolated case.

Behavioral Supports

Mesa Verde Middle School is “not doing the same old discipline.” Budget crunches cost the school its assistant principal—the person who was its primary dispenser of discipline. School psychologist Bob Harvell saw this loss as an opportunity to change. He began by presenting to the staff research to demonstrate that the old punishment approach—sending students to the office, for example—just didn’t work. “About twenty kids were waiting there at any given time, and they were the same kids that had been there before for the same infraction.” Instead of trying to build off of an ineffective model, Harvell helped the school implement positive behavior support as an alternative. Rather than manage behavior by issuing detention, Saturday school, or infraction points, staff at Mesa Verde now supports desirable behavior by trying to understand why students misbehave in the first place.

According to Harvell, students act out for two reasons: to get something or to get out of something. But, in his experience, punishment does not necessarily get at the root of the problem. Now at Mesa Verde, rather than dish out punishment for negative behavior, school staff reward students for positive

Top Ten Tips for Success

Courtesy: McKinleyville Middle School

10. Recognize when you having a bad day and turn it around (see 1–9)
9. Make sure that every student knows that you care about him
8. Share and welcome different opinions
7. Remind each other that you’re all there for a common goal: the success of your students
6. Have non-school related conversations and activities
5. Give and get a lot of chocolate
4. Utilize other teachers around you for support and encouragement
3. Share curriculum and responsibilities for students (teamwork)
2. Eat lunch together
1. Laugh with students and colleagues everyday

behavior. And, in instances of negative behavior that can’t be ignored, school staff follow a basic, two-tiered framework of behavioral support: change the environment so that it supports and rewards those behaviors that are desirable; and teach behaviors that are alternatives to those negative behaviors students have been punished for in the past.

The application of the framework was first applied at the classroom level: teachers were encouraged to

“Must Haves” for Successful Collaboration

Courtesy: Valley View Middle School

1. A supportive administrative staff that suggests and guides change and does not force change
2. A ton of patience because change is small and happens over long periods of time
3. A way to celebrate successes often!
4. The BEST Approach: Building Effective Schools Together
5. Adults who respect each other on campus and value each other’s strengths and differences

* In December 2004, CalSTAT selected a group of five schools that are models in one of the following: collaboration, behavioral supports, and literacy, three of the seven core messages of the State Improvement Grant (SIG). The goal of the SIG is to communicate common, or core, messages to the field about these three selected topics, in addition to family partnerships, transition, least restrictive environment, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These messages articulate critical research findings and essential components of effective application. All core messages

Essential Components of Effective Collaboration

Courtesy: Valley View Middle School

1. Good communication between the school and parents
2. The support of the community
3. Parent volunteers
4. BEST: Building Effective Schools Together approach to schoolwide positive behavioral supports
5. Participation, caring, and respect from the students

cultivate relationships with all their students and learn the different needs of each. This changed the environment of the classroom drastically, turning it into a place where the teacher accounted for the individual needs of each student. This made applying the second part of the framework—teaching alternative behaviors—easier because the teacher already had a good idea of what strategies were effective for each student and which ones weren't.

By eliminating punishment and helping students work out their problems, Mesa Verde has improved the school's climate. And its success shows in the students' academic performance, as well as its behavioral statistics: while behavioral referrals are down, test scores continue to climb.

Challenges to Overcome

Courtesy: Marine View Middle School

- Time: Finding time to collaborate; finding enough time to spend with students
- Dealing with Off-Campus Issues: inadequate parenting, divorce, problems with siblings and peers
- Closing the achievement gap: doing this while remaining aligned to standards

Collaboration

The staff at McKinleyville Middle School were “rejuvenated” by collaboration. “I felt I was alone struggling to support kids,” general education teacher Teri Waterhouse recalls. “Now, we’re helping all kids.” By collaborating with each other—general education teachers and special education teachers all working together—teachers like Waterhouse do not need to struggle to help students who need extra academic attention but who do not qualify for special education services. In the classroom, general and special education teachers collaborate by team-teaching and sharing each other's strengths. Outside of the classroom, teachers have partners with whom they discuss the challenges of specific students, plan strategically to address the challenges, and learn how to help similar students in the future. At the beginning of each school year, teaching teams try to schedule their prep periods together so they can coordinate and collaborate during the school day. However, when that is not possible, they meet before and after school.

The collaborative effort of teachers has resulted in an amazing transformation for the students as well. Because general and special education teachers work together, the classroom is integrated, translating to a rejuvenated student body. “When [students with disabilities] walk into the classroom, no one knows they're learning disabled. They're getting the support they need, [and they] can walk down the hall with their heads up,” resource specialist Mindy Fattig enthusiastically noted. The community the students have formed directly reflects the environment collaboration has created. The fact that teachers are no longer labeling students has, consequently, taught students not to label one another; in the process, they learn to accept and respect each other's differences. When resource specialists and general education teachers co-teach, they model for students that they too can collaborate with and support one another. And the tremendous effort the staff puts forth

has translated to the students working harder to reach new academic heights.

Teachers are now energized because they are no longer working alone. While there was an initial concern from both parents and school staff that the general education students would get short-changed, or that the special education students couldn't get the attention they need, academic success on all fronts has dismissed those worries and provided ample evidence that collaboration—at all levels—works.

When the staff at Pine Hollow Middle School saw “standardized testing coming down the pike,” explains Principal Marcie Brown, they knew it was time to collaborate. “We needed to address the needs of special ed and general ed the same way because we knew they had to take the same tests.” Taking the same tests meant that all students needed to be exposed to the same curriculum. As a natural extension, teachers saw the need to give all students the help they need, regardless of labels. As they saw it, standardized testing was a gift because it helped the staff see that some students were not getting the help they needed. Now, not only do students with disabilities receive the general curriculum along with the extra support needed to understand and apply the concepts presented, but students who have not been identified as needing special ed services can also receive extra support, which had not available before the school's collaborative program was in place.

While usually denoting general and special education working together, collaboration in practice at Pine Hollow is an even more encompassing effort. Teachers from different departments collaborate and form “interdisciplinary teams,” ensuring a breadth of knowledge and multiple avenues of support for both staff and students. Team members rotate each school year to give students a variety of voices and experiences.

Collaboration extends beyond these teaching teams, too. Administrators, teachers, parents, and the students are

all part of a school team that works to make collaboration successful and strives to create a better environment for everyone. When Pine Hollow considered switching from the special education pull-out model to a collaborative model a decade ago, the discussion involved everyone—teachers, other school staff, parents, and students—making sure that all parties involved understood the implications of the change. To this day, the school team still meets with collaborating teachers throughout the year for feedback about what’s working and what’s not. Parents also continue to participate in school events, including parent workshops on topics like retention and bullying. Students are encouraged to attend these workshops as well, again showing that Pine Hollow includes the entire school community.

Collaboration at Pine Hollow reaches even beyond the school. Because of its work at the middle school level, high schools in the district are changing the way they provide services so that the students experience consistency as they move from middle school to high school. As Principal Brown reiterates, “Education of all the students is the responsibility of everyone.”

Collaboration at **Valley View Middle School** started when staff members noticed that students with disabilities were successful in hands-on classes like science. Through the initiative of members of the English department, staff put politics and precedence aside and talked about what needed to be done to help all students, regardless of labels and the status quo. When the English teachers started to collaborate, they provided the support for the science teachers, and eventually the whole school, to realize that they “felt like they could support the [special ed] kids [in a general ed setting].” They started the “honest conversation” with the rest of the school out of a commitment to supporting student success across the board, paving the way for bringing general education and special education students together in every subject.

And, while the school staff was “pleasantly surprised” at how well all students performed academically, the biggest surprise was how collaborative classrooms contributed to a significant change in attitudes and how teachers who were apprehensive about bringing general and special education together became the biggest proponents of the approach. For one thing, teachers saw special education students gain confidence because they were treated like every other student. “Students love coming to school and being more successful,” observes Principal Nadine Rosenzweig. In addition, the general education students developed “a lot more compassion for students with difficulties.”

The personal and academic progress of all of these students has motivated Valley View to expand its collaborative effort. Recently, the school started integrating its special day class (SDC) students in general education science classes, along with the students who were formerly in (RSP) resource specialist classes. Given the typical severity of the disability of SDC students, and the fact that they are often taught in a separate facility altogether, Valley View’s efforts take inclusion a step further.

While integrating SDC students in general education classrooms seems like a big change, the staff and students are prepared to take this step. The honest conversations they had early on, and which they continue to have, has created a solid foundation of common goals and beliefs that support this approach. The message is clear: the school takes care of all students.

Literacy

Marine View Middle School holds an ambitious goal for each one of its students: everyone will leave middle school with proficient or advanced skills in language arts. With this in mind, and guided by California’s content standards, Marine View takes off running. It uses STAR assessment results as a screening device for students who may require academic intervention, as well as the SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory), a computer based

Top Books in Support of Collaboration

Courtesy: Marine View Middle School

Creech, Sharon. *Absolute, Normal Chaos*. HarperTrophy: New York, NY, 1997. Ages 9–12; 240 pages; novel written as a journal following the 13-year-old narrator during her summer vacation.

Pelzer, Dave. *A Child Called It: One Child’s Courage to Survive*. HCI: Deerfield Beech, FL, 1995. 195 pages; memoir about the author’s childhood, raised by his alcoholic mother, this book documents one of the most severe child abuse cases in California history.

Marzano, Robert J., Debra Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Alexandria, VA, 2001; 178 pages; book distills decades of research into nine teaching strategies that positively affect student learning; models for instruction; frames, rubrics, organizers, and charts to help teachers plan and implement.

Starkman, Neal, Peter Scales, and Clay Roberts. *Great Places to Learn: How Asset-Building Schools Help Students Succeed*. Search Institute: Minneapolis, MN, 1999; 216 pages; practical, proactive approach to helping students; real-life stories; handouts, charts, and action lists.

Tips for Success

Courtesy: Marine View Middle School

- Be willing to work together and really listen to one another.
- Problem solve.
- Shift your perspective to model for others building assets in children.
- Continue the work even if it is only one or two people—ignore negative peers and systems.

comprehension assessment that all students take at least three times per year. Finally, they administer the Johns Reading Inventory to students who actually do need academic intervention. However, Marine View does not treat their students like data. Instead, after assessments, students are individually scheduled into courses that will accelerate mastery of reading skills and that will support their move from below basic to basic, or basic to proficient, and eventually proficient to advanced.

To this end, the school employs a blended services model, which ensures that all students receive academic instruction based on need, regardless of their “label.” According to Principal Elizabeth Williams, the staff members formally ask themselves and other members of the team at monthly roundtable meetings, “What can we do to help each and every student each and every day?” and “What specific interventions are needed to support success for this child?” Every effort is made to ensure that time isn’t lost in placing a student in a needed support class. The team takes responsibility for

all students and works with one another on effective instructional practices.

This reputation for taking care of all of its students makes it a place where people want to be: Marine View often receives volunteer help from former students and parents. And feeder schools are eager to work with Marine View to ensure that approaches and instruction are consistent.

This kind of willingness is a direct result of the relationship that Principal Williams works to develop. At least once a year she visits fifth grade classes of each feeder school in an effort to get to know the students—and to give them a chance to get to know her. All assistant principals also visit the feeder schools. In addition, Marine View opens up its campus to all incoming fifth graders for Discovery Day, hosted by former Marine View students who have since advanced to high school. The event includes games, “getting to know you” activities, and campus tours. Because of this effort to build relationships, “parents of incoming students know the value of this school.” And the school understands the value of each student.

Summary

Though funding is a critical issue in almost all California schools, these five sites demonstrate that it is not always the primary, driving force behind change—or lack of it. Even in the face of fiscal challenges, innovative service delivery systems can take shape and education can flourish. In addition, while these middle schools have been rewarded for exemplary work in specific areas, these areas, in practice, are not mutually exclusive. For example, to enact a successful literacy campaign at a school, all the stakeholders (i.e., staff, parents, and students) must participate; hence, collaboration. Or, when a school is successful in its efforts to support positive behavior—an effort that requires collaboration—it will see an improvement in academic performance.

In the end, the goal is not to be successful in only one area, but to build a school that is strong in every aspect. As Marine View’s principal, Elizabeth Williams, explains, “It’s really about spreading the passion. [The success] is really doable. We just need a way to share [our methods]. That doesn’t mean it’s easy, but it’s do-able.”

Behavior Management and Discipline Websites

Courtesy: Cottonwood Elementary School

Dr. Mac’s Amazing Behavior Management Advice Site

<http://www.behavioradvisor.com>

This site offers practical advice about behavior management. Along with information on assessing behavior and interventions, this site contains sections devoted specifically to special ed teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, and parents.

Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ivdb/>

The IVBD of the University of Oregon researches conditions, processes, and factors related to violence and destructive behavior in at-risk children and adolescents, and it offers tools and resources that practitioners can use to create safe and healthy schools.

The Behavior Home Page

<http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/behavel/homepage.html>

Created for use by educators in all states, this site offers basic information about behavior interventions, as well as how federal laws affect special education and behavior, specifically. Changing features include information on “time outs” and safe and civil schools.

School and Community Violence Prevention and Intervention

<http://www.hamfish.org>

This site offers an impressive database of over 100 programs designed to reduce violence in schools and create safer learning environments. Programs descriptions are accompanied either by a contact person or a reference book.

The Really Big List of Classroom Management Resources

<http://drwilliammartin.tripod.com/classm.html>

A group of Monmouth University graduate students combed the Internet for the best resources for classroom management. The list currently ends at 421 sites, although they offer a list of the best sites (the list is currently at 54).

The You Can Handle Them All Website

<http://www.disciplinehelp.com/>

This website purports to be “a reference for handling over 117 misbehaviors at school and home.” This site helps teachers and guardians recognize certain misbehaviors by listing attitudes and actions that are typical of that misbehavior. A couple of the 117 misbehaviors are “the apathetic,” “the class clown,” and the “not my fault.”