

At the request of the Board, during the 2016-17 school year, the California Fiscal Crisis and Management Team (FCMAT) completed a thorough review of our special education department, programs and services. Overall, FCMAT described our school district's progress to increase access to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for K-12 students as "minimal." Additionally, they described PUSD's special education programs, services continuum, and service delivery models as too "traditional". Their August 2017 report made strong recommendations for PUSD to improve upon LRE access for our students with disabilities. Concurrently, at the end of the 2015-16 school year, the California Department of Education increased the 5-year LRE target rate benchmark for districts from 49.2% to 52.2%. Poway Unified has missed the LRE mark in serving students with disabilities for 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms every year since.

In response to the FCMAT report and the revised CDE LRE metric, a Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) was created. This workgroup included over 80 stakeholders (parents, teachers, instructional assistants, administrators, union representatives, school board members, etc) charged with charting a path forward. The SEAC met every other month for over a year-and-a-half, reviewing research, exploring models of inclusion in neighboring and like school districts, and ultimately recommending the district begin piloting more inclusive models of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities in Fall 2018. An Inclusive Practices Advisory Board composed of union representatives, school administrators, and certificated and classified staff was formed to provide oversight, and 10 schools submitted applications to participate. Three model schools were ultimately selected: Monterey Ridge Elementary School (MRES), Twin Peaks Middle School (TPMS), and Mt. Carmel High School (MCHS). Monterey Ridge Elementary and Twin Peaks Middle School each hosted Non-Severely Handicapped (NSH) Special Day Classes (SDC) that served students with mild-moderate disabilities, and each school proposed eliminating the program, to serve their students primarily in a general education setting. Staff at Monterey Ridge focused on creating a learning center to support students formerly served in the NSH setting while staff at Twin Peaks focused on implementing a co-teaching model of instruction. Mt. Carmel High School's focus was to increase the general education

course options with co-taught or Instructional Assistant supported models. At MCHS, staff created linked classes where learning strategies teachers collaborated closely with general education teachers in core academic classes like English and math to ensure students with disabilities were successful in the general education setting.

All three models, while uniquely different, achieved the intended outcome of significantly increasing students with disabilities' access to general education classes, grade level curriculum, and social participation with nondisabled peers. Prior to implementing more inclusive practices, as just one example, none of the students enrolled in the NSH SDC program at Monterey Ridge had access to the general education setting for more than 50% of their school day. Two short years later, 86% of these same students were receiving instruction in the general education setting for more than 50% of their school day. Moreover, all but one fifth grade student formerly enrolled in the NSH program will transition to general education 6th grade classes in middle school this next fall. The success of the inclusive model implemented at MRES was so impressive, the school was recognized by the United States Department of Education and designated a 2020 National Blue Ribbon School.

The outcomes achieved at our secondary schools were highly successful as well. Staff at Twin Peaks focused on creating systems of support to ensure students with disabilities were successful in the general education setting. They focused on increasing co-taught (1 general education teacher and 1 special education teacher) and collaboratively taught (1 general education teacher with 1 instructional assistant) classes. In 2018-19, there were 7 co-taught classes offered at TPMS. By 2020-21, there were 27 co-taught classes offered and 37 collaboratively taught classes. Like the staff at Monterey Ridge, staff at Twin Peaks have truly embraced the principles of inclusion. Clearly, their work shows their belief that students with disabilities are general education students first. Finally, at Mt. Carmel, linked classes have provided students with specialized academic instruction that supports pre-teaching and re-teaching of key concepts and new material presented in the general education setting, allowing more students with disabilities greater access to academic rigor. Prior to piloting inclusive practices, the California State University/University of California A-G graduation rate for students with disabilities

attending MCHS averaged 15%. After just the first year expanding linked classes, the CSU/UC A-G rate for students with disabilities jumped to 24%. This last school year, the rate jumped again, more than doubling from the baseline rate of 15% to 37%. Staff at all three of our model schools have worked tirelessly to ensure students with disabilities receive their education in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible.

The uncommon results achieved at each of our model schools has allowed us to boldly move forward implementing more inclusive practices districtwide. Effective next school year, 2021-22, we will be eliminating the Non-Severely Handicapped Special Day Class program at the elementary school level. 131 elementary age students served in the NSH SDC program will return to their schools of residence and will be supported in the general education setting across all 26 of our elementary school sites. Additionally 96% of our students coming out of NSH PreK SDC's are transitioning to general education TK or K classes and will receive specialized academic instruction at their schools of residence for 2021-22. We will also be closing the NSH SDC program at the middle school level as well. In addition to Twin Peaks Middle School, two more of our six middle schools will also be discontinuing the NSH SDC program this next fall to offer supported and inclusive general education courses. The three remaining middle schools will follow in the 2022-23 school year.

What sets our effort apart from other school districts simply closing special day classes is the way we went about our work. Data framed the moral imperative and need for systems improvement. This was never a cost savings initiative. Data validated the results achieved at each of the model school sites, and data has allowed us to credibly advance the work. Shared ownership of the problem with our stakeholders was also key. Rather than issuing a top-down directive, we engaged our school administrators and sought to identify strategic partners genuinely interested in leading this effort. Working with volunteers, we then encouraged staff to innovate, submit unique proposals created in collaboration with teachers, related service providers, support staff, and instructional assistants. This ensured that the schools selected to model inclusive practices were fully committed to implementing the necessary changes required to improve our students' experience. We also committed to building our

system's capacity to support the necessary instructional and mindset changes required for inclusion. PUSD's own 2017 CA Teacher of the Year, Megan Gross, led professional development as a Teacher-on-Special-Assignment. We paired her with two-time Classified Employee of the Year, Nancy Brundrett, who provides embedded, just-in-time coaching and support to Instructional Assistants working at our model and cohort schools. In the last three years, these two exemplary leaders have led more than 100 professional development workshops, even incorporating students and alumni as presenters. The workshops are differentiated to meet the needs of their audience, focused on a wide variety of topics: Universal Design for Learning, Behavior Support, Collaboration and Co-Teaching, Building Inclusive Classrooms, Scaffolding Instruction to Support Greater Access to General Education, etc. We were also awarded a Supporting Inclusive Practices grant two years ago that has renewed annually, allowing us to partner with innovative leaders like Kristin Brooks, Ed.D. and Kevin Schaefer. Their assistance facilitating conversations with general education and special education staff on the topic of Universal Design for Learning, in particular, has been invaluable.

At the direction of Superintendent Dr. Marian Kim-Phelps and with the support of our School Board, we will continue to focus our effort on expanding inclusive practices in the Poway Unified School District. During our last progress update to the Board of Education, Board members were extremely impressed. Vice President TJ Zane remarked, "I'm just blown away by the expertise and the specialization of our staff and the level of work they have accomplished for our students with special needs. The testimonials from our staff and families show what a long way as a District we've come since that FCMAT report. I can't wait to see what happens next." We are committed to re-designing special education services and instruction so we can create more equitable opportunities for our students in greater alignment with the requirements of LRE. Our next area of focus is preschool. Currently, the program supports five different types of special day classes. Our interest, through the implementation of Universal Design for Learning, Multi-Tiered Systems and Supports, cooperative learning and flexible grouping, is to shift to a fully included preschool program starting in August 2022.