



# PRESS RELEASE

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## **Poway Unified Receives Prestigious Golden Bell Award for its Special Education Inclusive Practices Program**



*(Poway/San Diego, CA)* – The Poway Unified School District (PUSD) is proud to announce that it is the recipient of the Golden Bell Award from the California School Board Association (CSBA). This prestigious honor, which highlights the best education practices across the State, is in the category of Special Education for PUSD’s Inclusive Practices Program.

The goal of PUSD’s Inclusive Practices Program is to re-design special

education services and instruction to create more equitable opportunities for students in the least restrictive environment.

The program began in 2018 with three model schools increasing students’ access to and inclusion in general education settings. Monterey Ridge Elementary and Twin Peaks Middle School each eliminated their Non-Severely Handicapped (NSH) Special Day Classes (SDC) that had served students with mild to moderate disabilities in classes separate from their peers, to serve their students primarily in a general education setting instead. 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 (special education and general education teachers in the same classroom together). 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 expanded 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.

The successful results achieved at each of our model schools allowed PUSD to move forward implementing more inclusive practices Districtwide. Effective this school year, 2021-22, PUSD has eliminated all Non-Severely Handicapped Special Day Classes at the elementary school level. By 2022-23 all NSH SDC classes at middle schools will be discontinued. The next scope of Inclusive Practices work will focus on the preschool level.

“What sets our effort apart from other school districts simply closing special day classes is the way we approached our work,” Associate Superintendent of Student Support Services Greg Mizel explained. “Data framed the moral imperative and need for systems improvement, 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.” The Special Education department encouraged staff to innovate, submit 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. Finally, PUSD was committed to building our system’s capacity to support the necessary instruction and training required for inclusion, with more than 100 professional development workshops dedicated to this effort over the past three years.

PUSD parent Tiffany, whose daughter attends Monterey Ridge Elementary School, said her daughter, for the first time, “felt included as a classmate, not a visitor, from start to finish every day. It was not only a great experience for her, for us as a family, but for her classmates, to know and understand neurodiversity and that kids learn differently and may act differently and that’s OK! As a parent of a child with special needs, I can’t tell you how great it feels every day knowing that my child is going to school where she’s valued and celebrated right along with everyone else, not treated any differently and appreciated.”



### **About CSBA’s Golden Bell Award Program**

The Golden Bell Awards are presented by the California School Boards Association to promote excellence in public education and school board governance practices. The awards reflect the depth and breadth of education programs and governance decisions supporting these programs that are necessary to address students’ changing needs. CSBA is a non-profit education association that represents the elected officials who govern public school district and county offices of education,

supporting nearly 1,000 education agencies and more than 6 million students statewide. To learn more about the Golden Bell Awards and all 39 winners, visit: <https://gb.csba.org/>

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