“Letting kids in” is a guiding mantra for Kristin Brooks. Director of the Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) project, Brooks has devoted much of her professional life to ensuring that students who have been marginalized because of their disabilities have the opportunity to learn alongside their peers, and that all students are challenged by a rigorous curriculum.

“Our project isn’t just about students with disabilities,” she says. “This goes back to civil rights in general, and to literally letting all kids in the door.”

**Beginnings**

In September 2015, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education issued a joint policy statement on the importance of inclusion in early childhood programs. Out of this statement about the proven, fundamental, and life-altering benefits of inclusion, the SIP project was born. According to Noelia Hernandez, California Department of Education consultant and monitor for the project, the SIP’s purpose was to provide support and technical assistance to local education agencies (LEAs) to increase the amount of time that students with disabilities are included in general education settings, especially in preschool.

The SIP project was also designed to help the state meet federal monitoring requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B, for the California State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Reports. The SIP targeted three specific indicators within these requirements: those that tracked statewide assessments, least restrictive environment (LRE), and LRE for students with disabilities in preschool through third grade.

The project was originally launched at the Santa Clara County Office of Education, which for decades had been a hub of research-based educational creativity, specifically with the Inclusion Collaborative. The SIP first operated through a request-for-proposal process, choosing LEAs based on their data profiles and plans for inclusion. At the SIP’s launch, Brooks was working as director of special education for the Etiwanda School District, where she had created the award-winning inclusive preschool CLOUDS: Creating Learning Opportunities and Understanding Differences in Students.

The SIP was then directed by now-retired Janice Battaglia, who also ran the Inclusion Collaborative. CLOUDS became a model site for SIP, Brooks became directly involved, and the SIP project quickly grew. Battaglia soon saw that the project needed its own designated director and asked Brooks if she wanted the job. “The thought of being able to build up this statewide system of inclusion for students with disabilities was just too attractive to pass up,” says Brooks.

*(SIP, continued on page 16)*

---

**What’s Inside . . .**

- Letter from the State Director 2
- Cornerstones of the SIP 3
- Yreka Elementary USD 4
- Fresno USD 6
- Covina-Valley USD 9
- Arcadia USD 11
- Orange USD 13
- CHIME Charter School 20
More than twenty years after the reauthoriza- tion of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), we continue to strive as a state and a nation to more fully include students with disabilities in our general education classrooms. Decades of research support the benefits of inclusion for all children, those with disabilities and those without. But more than just a “best practice,” inclusion is for many of us a moral imperative. As we further a vision of an inclusive world of work, play, political and social engagement, and countless opportunities for every child in California, we must be steadfast in ensuring that every child is learning in the most inclusive environment possible and feels a true sense of safety and belonging.

This issue of The EDge showcases the work of one of the California Department of Education Special Education Division’s signature projects designed to improve outcomes and access for students with disabilities: the Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) project. With the latest California School Dashboard illuminating students with disabilities as one of the state’s most challenged student groups, it has never been more critical to provide the “how” to improve outcomes for these students. The SIP project shares and improves on the strategies and structures, illustrating the ways in which inclusive practices contribute to this “how.” The project brings those local education agencies (LEAs) that are realizing success in their inclusive efforts together with those seeking improvement. The project offers all of us the chance to learn what is working in our schools.

I would be remiss if I did not recognize the significance of the role general and special education teachers play both in successfully including students with disabilities in general education and in ensuring mastery of grade-level standards. Changes and updates to California’s teaching credentials are aligning teacher preparation programs with the vision of inclusive practices. Through these programs, special education teachers will be learning alongside their general education colleagues as they increase subject-matter competence so they can help all students achieve higher learning standards, while general education teachers will be increasing their skills to ensure they are prepared to work with diverse student populations, including students with disabilities. All new teachers will leave their credential programs with knowledge of how to work within a multi-tiered system of support, which includes how to build curriculum and instruction, and share but to credit CalSTAT and CDE. This issue is in the public domain unless otherwise indicated. Contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of NCOE or the California Department of Education (CDE), nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement. Circulation: $1.00. The information in this issue is in the public domain unless otherwise indicated. Readers are encouraged to copy and share but to credit CalSTAT and CDE. This issue is available on disk, audiotape, and in large print upon request. By going to CalSTA’s Web site—www.calstat.org/VIPPublications.htm—you can download PDF and text versions of this and previous newsletters. Contact The EDge by telephone at 707-849-2279, by e-mail at kristin.wright@calstat.ca.gov or by postal mail: CalSTAT, PO Box 1450, Technology Lane, Suite 200, Petaluma, CA 94954.

By Kristin Wright, Director, Special Education Division

I challenge all of us to relentlessly pursue the goal of helping each and every child in California, a system first articulated in the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence. In response, she has defined three cornerstone pieces of the SIP to address these barriers: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Policy to Practice. These cornerstones serve to ensure that teachers have the skills, the professional and administrative support, and the best practices they need to teach all students well. Brooks also tailors the professional development that the SIP provides around these cornerstone pieces to ensure that what each LEA receives is evidence-based, meaningful in context, and immediately useful in schools or districts. Brooks’ dissertation for the doctorate she’s working on explores the correlation between organizational health and the percentage of students with disabilities included in general education. “My assumption is that healthy organizations are willing to take risks, think outside the box, and create new systems to include all kids.”

“We’re not talking about throwing out the decades of lesson plans that teachers have worked hard to develop. We’re talking about looking at those plans, thinking about them, and removing barriers to learning. With UDL, we’re offering a buffet, not just a one-dish meal,” Brooks says. “It’s preventable. It starts with knowing your kids. That’s is not foreign to what teachers do anyway. It’s just tons of teachers are saying, ‘I don’t want to teach those kids because I don’t know how. And I don’t have the support. And I’m scared to try something new.’ We have to have classroom doors wide open and teachers working together being authentic—neither being afraid to say, ‘My kids failed this. Your kids aced it. What did you do that I didn’t do?’” It is Brooks’ conviction that well-run professional learning communities (PLCs) can mitigate and address these fears by giving teachers the ideal venue for modeling new strategies, having rich conversations, and sharing professional guidance. Brooks also argues for rigor in these communities. “You need to build into PLCs a structure for how you’re going to respond to the four main questions: What do we want students to learn, know, and be able to? How are we going to assess if they’ve learned it, or if they haven’t? What are we going to do if they haven’t learned it? And what are we going to do when they already know it?” These questions are the core of response to intervention (RTI), and “why’s that PLCs and RTI go together so well. And need to go together.” For many reasons, committed administrative leadership is essential for PLCs to work as intended because of the importance of common meeting and planning time. The SIP helps LEAs figure out how to carve out and protect this time in meaningful ways, especially at the elementary level where they say, “Well, we don’t have block schedule, so we don’t have common planning time.” Brooks allows no excuses. “Well, you need to create common planning time.”

As she works with LEAs to create the healthiest systems possible, Brooks’ third cornerstone is turning policy into practice. “People talk about LEAs to ‘look at your vision and mission statements, and then make sure that you’re doing what you need to do and providing the supports necessary to make your school a great place for every kid.”

“We become educators because we love kids, and we are committed to helping them grow into bright futures. Our work involves fully realizing the commitment of honoring each child’s individuality and giving teachers the training and support they need to work with every child. We know that educating all kids together—helping them learn with and from each other—is a great way to prepare them for adult life.”

Kristin Wright, Director, Special Education Division, CDE
Lorraine Hope: CDE Contact Monitor and Project Liaison
Noella Hernandez: CDE Content and Editorial Consultant
Connie Silva: CalSTAT Project Manager
Mary Cisy Grady: Editor
Giselle Blong: Editorial Assistant
Janet Mandelstam: Staff Writer and Copy Editor
Geri West: CalSTAT Content Consultant
Kristin Brooks: Contributor
The EDge is published three times each year by the Napa County Office of Education’s CalSTAT Project (California Services for Technical Assistance and Training).

From a survey of educators, SIP Project Director Kristin Brooks learned that “fear of failure” and “mindset” present the greatest barriers to creating and sustaining inclusive practices and settings. In response, she has defined three cornerstone pieces of the SIP to address these barriers: Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and Policy to Practice. These cornerstones serve to ensure that teachers have the skills, the professional and administrative support, and the best practices they need to teach all students well. Brooks also tailors the professional development that the SIP provides around these cornerstone pieces to ensure that what each LEA receives is evidence-based, meaningful in context, and immediately useful in schools or districts.
3 schools in the LEA: Evergreen Elementary (grades TK–4) and Jackson Street Elementary (grades 5–8). 1 community day school
County: Siskiyou
Total student enrollment: 1,001

In resource classrooms, students with mild to moderate disabilities receive the specially designed instruction they need to access curriculum and to learn. Sometimes students receive all of their instruction in these classrooms (often called RSP classes). Sometimes students are part of a “pull-out program,” where they are in general education classrooms for part of their day and then “pulled out” to receive their special education services in RSP.

At Yreka’s Evergreen Elementary School, the RSP classroom is located in the middle of a sprawling campus. Large windows frame views of the Klamath National Forest, the walls are filled with colorful posters, and most of the furniture is child-sized, perfectly fitting the K–3 students who attend Evergreen. On a morning in April, Michele Freeze is there, readily guiding a first-grade girl through a math lesson.

Freeze is an experienced special educator who knows her way around individualized instruction. But she is part of a district leadership team that is in the first stages of trying to reduce—if not eliminate altogether—the need for this very pleasant place. Their reasons are pragmatic and compelling.

Source of Commitment
Even though she is a special educator, Freeze speaks from the perspective of a parent when asked why she found herself immediately committed to inclusion. “Whenever I look at a student who’s on an IEP, I think about where I would want that child placed if he were mine. What would I want him to experience, and what friends would I want him with? That’s how I look at every child now. Would I want my kid pulled out during ELA [English language arts], when there is so much rich language expression, vocabulary, and exposure to the core curriculum? Of course not.”

Dunlap speaks first as an educator. “What’s interesting,” she says, “is that when I was a teacher, I didn’t want my kids [with disabilities] pulled out. A lot of our teachers have that philosophy. They’d rather keep them in their classrooms. But she is also the parent of an eighth-grade boy who was diagnosed with autism as a toddler. “There were some general education programs, like an afterschool program, and our instructors knew the ‘why’ of inclusion. These leaders went to all of the SIP trainings,” which typically include the fundamentals of inclusive practices, information about staff development, discussions of what inclusion would look like and how it would work for them in their schools,” says Anne Trues of Orange USD, where leaders were also the first to be trained.

The varied roles that Parsons has held as an educator have well-positioned him to serve as inclusion’s advocate for Yreka. He taught as a special educator in preschool through middle school before becoming a school administrator and then district superintendent. “I’ve seen inclusion work,” he says. “I remember one preschooler who had absolutely no oral language skills, and he ended up going into a Head Start inclusion program. By the time he was in kindergarten, he sounded just like your average kid.”

Inclusion and the Law

Perspective: Promoting Positive Interaction Between Students with Disabilities

The terms “mainstreaming,” “integration,” “full inclusion,” and “reverse mainstreaming” do not appear in any of these terms. These terms have been developed by educators to describe various ways of meeting the LRE requirements. As a result, the exact definitions of these terms may vary among different educational agencies—school districts, county offices of education, or Special Education Local Planning Areas (SELPAs). In general, special and general educators must make innovative and systematic efforts to promote positive interactions between students with disabilities (those with learning disabilities as well as those with significant cognitive, physical, and other low-incidence disabilities) and their peers without disabilities.

—Adapted from Special Education Rights and Responsibilities, Chapter 7, by Disabilities Rights California. This document is available free of charge at https://www.disabilityrights.org/publications/serr-special-education-rights-and-responsibilities

Preparing with Training and Support

“Training the leaders” is how school districts often introduce the idea of full inclusion. Katherine Mahoney of Arcadia USD says, “We decided to make sure that our board of education, our cabinet, our principals, and our instructors knew the ‘why’ of inclusion. These leaders went to all of the SIP trainings,” which typically include the fundamentals of inclusive practices, information about staff development, discussions of what inclusion would look like and how it would work for them in their schools,” says Anne Trues of Orange USD, where leaders were also the first to be trained.

This preparation is necessary, Trues believes, because the people are “how we lead the change and explain to teachers why it matters. More. At the same time, they should invest in inclusion. It is a lot of hard work.”

Preparation also includes being sure that “the teachers and sites feel competent and supported,” says Sarah Beggs, also of Orange. She talks about an “Aha” moment when she first proposed inclusion at a meeting with the district’s teachers union. “We love our belief,” says Beggs, and “in what we know. In our group, we know that inclusion is right for kids, and we’re very passionate about it. But then all of a sudden we’re hearing, ‘We don’t want those students in my classroom. They don’t belong there. I didn’t sign up to be a special education teacher.’ The pushback from concerned educators helped Beggs see the importance of attitude and belief among staff—that it’s “we need extra training and support. We don’t want our teachers out there on their own feeling like they have to solve all of the problems by themselves.”

Elizabeth Eminizer has helped to create capacity among staff at Covina-Valley USD by focusing on data, not impressions, feelings, or habits. “What the data say has to be our laser-like focus for all students,” she says. Ryan Perry, also of Covina-Valley, talks about how the focus of staff training has expanded. “As soon as the SIP grant came into place, trainings focused on teacher support for all students, not general education or special education specific. This was a significant shift. By definition, inclusive means everybody.” And he sees consistent support for teachers as central to success: “I feel very strongly that if you throw something out there, you have a greater chance of failure. And failure in the world of education means that a door gets shut. I don’t want that door shut.”

Achievable, Results-focused, and Time-bound. But systemic issues drove the LRE numbers—especially the practice and habit of pulling students out of general education classrooms to receive special instruction, which is inherent in the special education system we’ve focused on schools across the country. The operating assumption was that, if a student has a disability, the special services and supports required by the student’s IEP would be handled best in a separate classroom.

So Dunlap looked carefully at the programs that were being used at Evergreen and how and why students were being pulled out of general education (Yreka, continued on page 8)
Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) for all students, is a hallmark of the move toward one system of education. “We saw that research showed indicators of the Fresno Unified School District’s initial wrong. In the spring of 2017 the district convened a Best Practices Inclusion Focus Group to identify the root cause of the lack of inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities,” Kalpakoff says. The group’s analysis led to an understanding of the challenges Fresno Unified faced as it began its participation in the SIP. These challenges helped to shape its action plan. On receiving its SIP grant, the district created a leadership team of Assistant Superintendent Brian Beck, SELP Director Adriaan Varanini, Kalpakoff, and three other special education program managers and tasked it with developing a three-year action plan. Although the district had begun, and continues, its inclusion efforts at the secondary level, it chose seven elementary schools to participate in the SIP. The principals at those sites then became part of the leadership team to carry out the plan.

**Inclusion Toolkit**

There are several more items in the inclusion toolkit, including a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP), Digicoach, year-long, specially designed learning. Fresno Unified is in the process of developing MTSS districtwide. “Special education will be part of that process,” says Kalpakoff. “We don’t want to be in silos.” Being part of the process also was important as the district drafted its LCAP—the goals, actions, services, and expenditures to support student outcomes. “We had input into meeting the needs of our kids,” says Julie Wheelock, special education program manager. “There’s an extended school year in the LCAP, for example, and our kids will attend that. And the LCAP increases the participation of special education in the arts, athletics, and other activities.”

The addition of Digicoach, a classroom walking team, into the way teachers receive feedback. Using the program on a smartphone or tablet, school administrators and other evaluators can quickly rate a teacher and a classroom setting in such areas as learning environment, behavioral interventions, and student engagement. “It’s transparent, it’s not evaluative, and it gives effective feedback,” says Kalpakoff. “It’s building capacity for teachers.” At Wishon Elementary, one of the SIP sites, Principal Annarita Howell carries hidden Digicoach classrooms to access Digicoach and assess the instruction. With the press of a finger, the results are sent to teachers immediately, and Howell posts aggregate data on a white board. “We have an ongoing data well where we look at areas of concern,” she says. “A special Learning Community meeting Tuesday and Thursday to discuss feedback.” The feedback, she says, “is never a ‘gotcha’; it’s about improving instruction and student learning.”

Currently, says Kalpakoff, principals have Digicoach results only for their own sites. “We’re looking at how we can run the reports so we can incorporate information, so we can see what one school does well and they can learn from each other.” Then there’s UDL, which “really came to the fore this year. This is about better instruction for all students,” says Kalpakoff. “We’re applying the UDL model day in and day out,” adds Ruschhaupt, “helping teachers select what they need for their lesson and use multiple models of instruction.”

Howell says her goal for all students with disabilities at Wishon is to spend at least 40 percent of school time in general education settings. “New IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) will reflect that goal,” she says. “Students with IEPs get baseline core curriculum [ter 1] instruction in a general education class.” Tier 2 instruction is for students who need extra help also occurs in the classroom. “It’s a push-in model, and that’s a change,” says Howell.

**Co-Teaching**

Co-teaching also is taking root at the SIP school sites. “We set up intentional professional learning on co-teaching,” says Howell, “and we spent a year on emotional intelligence. As the students see it in the classroom, ‘they have two teachers.’” Since it already had co-teaching at some of its secondary schools, the district began more concerted training for co-teaching with general and special education teachers.

**Action Plan**

Indeed, the goal of changing attitudes and mindset, of getting buy-in on inclusive practices from every classroom, every administrator to classroom teachers—is raised as a challenge throughout the SIP action plan. “It is important to have an understanding of the work at the district level,” says Kalpakoff. She says Superintendent Robert Nelson is supportive of inclusion, and Assistant Superintendent Beck remains on the leadership team. “We had a vision,” says Kalpakoff. “There was a lot of territorial pushback from special ed teachers at the beginning.”

Phil McIlhagger, a regional instructional manager who works closely with the SIP sites. “But within a year there was a shift.” To improve the district’s standing on the LRE indicator, the action plan set two goals to be met by June 2018. The district achieved a targeted increase in the percentage of students with disabilities who spend more than 80 percent of their day in general education environments as measured by the annual performance review. But it failed to meet its LRE goal of reducing the percentage of students who are in general education settings less than 40 percent of the school day. That work carries over into the next school year and will join five additional goals to be met by 2020, which include reducing the number of students in substantially separate classrooms, increasing the number of co-teaching classrooms, achieving high scores in Digicoach, and establishing “Accountable Communities” where general and special education work collaboratively in curriculum, assessment, planning, and implementation of inclusive practices.

The action plan also calls for aligning SIP work to MTSS, providing release time for professional learning, and training teachers on co-teaching, UDL, and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). For now, the plan focuses on the secondary level. Ultimately, says Kalpakoff, “we will be taking this on as a district-wide action plan.”
Yreka, from p. 5

settings. She paid particular attention to one language program that was effective for all struggling students and that was being used as a pull-out remedy for students with and without IEPs, causing them to miss important core instructional time. “Too many kids were switching in and out of it every quarter. Then I went to the SIP training and realized we need to put this inside the classroom; not outside. By making this program part of general education, she reports that this year, “we only had ten kids below grade level in phonics. Before we had 40 percent. This year we’ve definitely evolved.”

placemore students with disabilities in general education classrooms, with special educators and paraprofessionals spending time in those same classrooms; it also included providing more interventions and support to students without IEPs. “More kids benefit,” says Dunlap.

Challenges

The systemic changes that Yreka has made as a result of its work with the SIP are invariably intertwined with the requirement for people to change along with them. “From the leadership standpoint,” says Parsons, the most difficult thing about introducing inclusive models “is trying to explain the concept to the staff, get buy-in, and provide the support they need to implement this kind of model.” In Parsons’ experience, that support requires more than just knowing how to do it. “Through our work with the county, we’re trying to build those grade-level teams and the subject-level teams so that there’s the urgency to be reflective, and so that teachers also have support from their peers. And it’s OK to try new things and to make mistakes—and not be afraid. We don’t have an answer yet for those people who don’t want to reflect and look internally. But that’s part of our process.”

Dunlap agrees that getting teachers to realize that “you can do this, and it’s part of your job” can be a slow and challenging process. But Yreka has embraced inclusive practices for the long haul. The district will include the SIP in its 2018-2019 Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) as an action item in support of expanding inclusive efforts. Parsons views these activities as integral to the district’s work to improve student performance in general and to add access to students with disabilities specifically. As Yreka closes in on the end of its first year of participating in the SIP project, the leadership team will be deciding what to do next. “Our leadership team will review how each model worked. Some experience with small groups, how would our action plan,” says Dunlap. “Right on,” she says, “we’re still exploring.”

In a math class at Covina High School, Gary Hinckley is at the white board explaining a principle of geometry. Resource specialist and high school science teacher, he is walking around the room, helping any student who asks.

Students with a variety of learning disabilities make up nearly one third of the 20 or so teenagers in the room, but it’s difficult to know who has a disability and who doesn’t. One boy sits stone still at his desk, hogging his backpack while all the other students take notes. But it turns out that he is one of the higher achieving students; he had missed the previous day’s class and is simply using a listening strategy for effective first instruction, according to Ryan Parry.

Parry is a program specialist for the district, and this math class is just one of the many co-taught inclusive classrooms that he helped introduced to the high schools in the Covina-Valley Unified School District three years ago. Inclusion was part of the district’s efforts to secure better outcomes for its students with disabilities specifically.

He sees inclusive classrooms as the best place for most students with disabilities to be. “It makes sense for everyone,” says Parry. “For students with disabilities, it’s the only place for most students with disabilities to be. You can create a highly dysfunctional culture. If I can work with Charles, I am very comfortable.”

Leadership Style

Curiosity and positive energy characterize the leadership style at Yreka. “Even though this is our first year [of implementing inclusive models], I’m excited,” says Dunlap. “I know our teachers want to help kids.” She is focused on “expanding and improving supports for our inclusion models.” But to begin, she says, “We didn’t have to hire ten new people. We’re using people who were already here. We just changed the structure and shifted our people around. We’re using them in different ways.” This restructuring included

If I can work with Charles, I am very interested.”

“At the time,” says Charles Bourque, who is now teacher on special assignment in support of inclusion, “we had some students with disabilities in general education; we had a middle tier, kind of like an ISP class, called an ‘01’ class; and then a third tier, an essentials class. All three of these were directed toward students getting a high school diploma. Ryan and I had been thinking that kids in that middle-level ISP class could be successful in general education.” Bourque talks about a common belief among special educators to “hold on to our kids. But we were depriving them of that chance to work with their peers.”

The SIP project came in the form of an email invitation to apply for a grant to systematically introduce and sustain inclusive practices. “Our LRE numbers weren’t great,” says Parry. “But we had leadership who said, ‘let’s do this.’ We decided that with knowledge, help, and support, we could succeed.”

Leadership

“The way that Ryan started—slowly and in a targeted fashion—was so insanely smart,” says Bourque. “People knew him and how impactful he has been to this district. That made it much easier for him to get people on board. Now the system is so strong and powerful.”

Eminimizer attributes the success of the inclusive efforts to “these two fabulous
The district’s action plan for the SIP was direct: Review current practices, provide professional development in support of inclusion and co-teaching, implement the practices, and monitor the results; at the same time, expand current practices within the high schools, add inclusive settings to Covina High, and extend them each year into the next grade. Staff responsible for each step were identified, as were the resources needed. Timelines were established and evidence of success defined.

**Building Through the Grades**

In the fall of 2016, the number of co-taught high school classes increased from 8 to more than 15, with transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classes all fully included. Corrine Lampers, an experienced special educator with a multi-subject credential, is credited with successfully introducing inclusion to the early grades. “I work directly with the general education teachers,” she says, “providing the support they need to meet the needs of students in the classroom.” Then I work directly with the students themselves. Since she set that model in place, other co-teaching teams have been introduced in the first grade, and next year in the second.

Lampers provides “critical expertise at that beginning level,” says Bourque. “When we meet as a student services team, she brings back important information about what [the new inclusion efforts] look like, what the numbers are, what levels of need are increasing or decreasing, and what supports need to be in place. Corrine is working so hard to make sure that’s all starts if the plan is to grow. Thanks to her, we know what every next year is going to look like.”

**Serving All**

The SIP leadership team at Covina Valley sees the inclusion initiative as part of a larger, seamless effort to serve all students. The district has made recent news for its 98 percent graduation rate for Latino students. The SIP itself has generated additional threads. “We started learning about UDL,” says Bourque, “and we’re bringing that to our district. Another thing that’s changed dramatically is our collaborative relational work. Two years ago, I would go to the English Department meetings. I had developed good rapport with them, but I still felt like an outsider. Now at these meetings, there’s a strong feeling of community.”

**Current Implementation**

Covina Valley’s level of success with its inclusive models has made the district ambitious for more. Part of the SIP plan was to get students with disabilities “involved and supported in the general education curriculum as fast as possible.” But Parry is especially delighted with students who are integrating with IEPs who have “completely exited” from special education rosters during their last two years of high school. “This is exceptional. To see it so late is rare, because that [achievement gap] grows over time. We’re now seeing the fruits of our labor. We also know that an inclusive English class at South Hills High School has had measurable positive impact on the whole school in English. That tells you it’s working. And people are really excited about it.”

Bourque also talks about the success of kindergarten inclusion efforts in the last year, referring to the numbers of students whose “level of need in the IEP has decreased.” Lampers explains that students, particularly those with speech and language, often need special services because of the benefits of early intervention in inclusive settings: “They’re being supported in the right kind of environment with peer modeling and co-inclusion supports.”

“That’s a very new pattern for us,” says Bourque. “And as we’re seeing more students [with disabilities] with greater levels of success, we are recognizing that these students are like all the other students, they just need a different level of support. Teachers are also recognizing that the expertise is spreading throughout the campus benefiting a larger group of students. And that’s creating more buy-in.”

(Covina Valley, continued on page 19)

In the Empathy Room at Camino Grove Elementary School, students get a sense of what it is like to live with a learning disability or to be on the autism spectrum. Activities at different stations in the room replicate such experiences as sensory overload, or the frustration of not being able to do it. At the end of the station, students gather in a “community circle and talk about what they’ve learned,” says Danape Popovich, the school’s principal. “It’s pretty powerful. The students say things like, ‘This was really frustrating for me. I don’t know if I could do this if I had to learn this way all day long. And ‘This was really hard. I wanted to scream and yell. Then they talk about how they can be a better friend’ to the students on campus who have a disability.” That empathy room has played a big role in helping our students have a more positive understanding of what a person with a disability goes through.”

Popovich also credits this room with helping to pave the way for inclusive classrooms, where students with disabilities learn alongside their peers without disabilities. Since the Empathy Room has become a regular fixture at the school, “I’ve noticed that the campus has changed,” she says. “The kids are empathetic and inclusive on the playground, in the classroom, and at lunch.”

**Setting the Stage**

Inclusive practices found ready ground throughout the Arcadia Unified School District, there were no lack of classrooms, strategies, or co-teachers. When Katherine Mahoney, Arcadia’s director of special education, arrived three years ago, “We had identified” for not meeting the state’s LRE targets, she recalls. The state required 52 percent of students with disabilities to spend at least 80 percent of their time in general education settings. In 2012–2013, 20 percent of Arcadia’s students met that goal. Then that percentage dropped to 27.7 in 2014–2015. “So there was something going on,” says Mahoney. While LRE numbers were declining, “a group of teachers had been thinking about co-teaching,” says Popovich. In support of this interest, district leaders sponsored a training with Rich Villa, a co-teaching and inclusion expert. Popovich refers to that training as one of several “Aha! moments” that ultimately contributed to her embracing inclusive practices. As well, she had been developing an interest in universal design for learning (UDL), inspired by Todd Rose’s research on “The End of Average” and planning for the margins.

“And then we had Restorative Practices,” says Popovich. “We were learning to build community, help students develop positive relationships, feel more connected to school, and create leadership opportunities for our students—all of these things were coming together and the stars were aligned.”

The vehicle for that alignment came in 2014, when the then-director of special education, David Munoz, applied for the SIP grant, placing Arcadia in the first cohort of applicants. Mahoney’s vision for an implementation plan after the grant was awarded, which included an extensive, district-level root cause analysis to discover why Arcadia’s LRE numbers were so low. Several reasons emerged. One had to do with the district’s culture of viewing special education as a location rather than a service; another involved a lack of opportunities for students with disabilities across the grade span to be included in general education settings; and then there was general lack of training and implementation of inclusive practices. In the fall of 2016, the number of co-taught high school classes increased from 8 to more than 15, with transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classes all fully included.

Lampers provides “critical expertise at that beginning level,” says Bourque. “When we meet as a student services team, she brings back important information about what [the new inclusion efforts] look like, what the numbers are, what levels of need are increasing or decreasing, and what supports need to be in place. Corrine is working so hard to make sure that’s all starts if the plan is to grow. Thanks to her, we know what every next year is going to look like.”

Bourque also talks about the success of kindergarten inclusion efforts in the last year, referring to the numbers of students whose “level of need in the IEP has decreased.” Lampers explains that students, particularly those with speech and language, often need special services because of the benefits of early intervention in inclusive settings: “They’re being supported in the right kind of environment with peer modeling and co-inclusion supports.”

“That’s a new pattern for us,” says Bourque. “And as we’re seeing more students [with disabilities] with greater levels of success, we are recognizing that these students are like all the other students, they just need a different level of support. Teachers are also recognizing that the expertise is spreading throughout the campus benefiting a larger group of students. And that’s creating more buy-in.”

(Covina Valley, continued on page 19)
Collaborating
Finding time for teachers to collaborate is a challenge in nearly every school and district that introduces inclusion goals and planning together as a core model. “We recognized,” says Elizabeth Euminower in Conavy-Valery SD, “that in order for teachers to be effective in this work, they need to have dedicated, committed time to plan together, to collaborate, and to look at the achievement data together for all students, particularly English Learners (ELs). We believe that these more vulnerable children will fall behind without focused instruction. So we’ve negotiated with the union to embed PLC time for our teachers, 4PD time a week. Then we increased instructional minutes for students. This is all part of our LCAP in Fresno, where co-teaching began in secondary schools, then expanded to all grades. The same team period for collaboration,” says Program Manager Julie Wheelock, “and they meet weekly in Accountable Communities with all teachers in their content area.”

Amy Dunlap in Yrea and Danae Popovich in Arcadia addressed the challenge of finding time for teachers to collaborate by restructuring their methods. “They used to be about telling what’s going on, or planning events,” says Dunlap. Now her teachers use staff meeting time to create the SMART goals for the school. “We have a teachers meeting together at the same time every week,” says Popovich. “It’s usually for 5-10 minutes,” she says, “and then the rest is professional learning time for teachers to deepen their knowledge about such practices as Thinking Maps, UDL, Restorative Practices, and Leader in Me. Finding enough time for teachers to collaborate on their collaborative teaching classrooms, however, remains a challenge: “I don’t think we’ve fully addressed it,” says Popovich. “It’s definitely a work in progress.”

Orange USD has also altered class and meeting schedules so that teachers “have this protected time to meet as grade-level teams and professional learning communities,” said Denise MacAllister, “which include special educators,” says Denise MacAllister. “We also train on how to plan online for co-teaching,” says Anne Trux, “so you don’t have to always meet face-to-face every time you need to come on-plan.”

“When it’s been really difficult, we have provided subs, or my team will come in and cover for some of the days. It’s also true that after the initial half hour, when they need it.” adds Orange’s Sara Bergen.

The fifth-grade classroom at Handy Elementary School is carefully orchestrated. Teacher Natasha Chavez has grouped students in clusters around the room, some working on English language arts. Some students are at computer screens, some are with Chavez at a white board, others are reading on their own, and still others are working with Shaina Wright, the inclusion teacher for the class. Students with disabilities and without are intermixed. All activity is tracked on computerized charts, the instructions use a defined set of rubrics to scaffold their lessons, and different standards and goals are assigned to each student. The energy and engagement belies any impression that even a single student is struggling. They all seem to be simply engaged and learning.

The Principal, Michelle Owen and the teaching staff at Handy represent just one of the many inclusive elementary school teams in the Orange Unified School District. The entire district operates from the belief that all students can learn and that inclusive settings are commonly the best place for that learning to happen. The Start

Denise MacAllister, the district’s executive director of special education, credits Anne Trux, Orange’s assistant superintendent, with setting the stage for a culture that embraces inclusion. Using Tippet’s guidance, the Educational Services Division started to dissolve instructional distinctions among special education, general education, and English language development, with the guiding principle that “we’re all in it together for all kids.”

“We saw that we needed improvement,” says Sara Bergen, referring to the district’s low LRE scores, “we knew we had the right leadership team here, and we had the SIP funding for support” referring to the Supporting Inclusive Practices grant. “We partnered with the IEPS coordinator for inclusive services. Orange was in the first cohort of SIP grantees. While pockets of inclusion had existed in the district for a number of years, the SIP precipitated a carefully planned approach to “growing” inclusion. The education high SIP grant did was add address issues of mindset, specifically the staff’s beliefs about inclusion, about the potential of students with disabilities, and about the rights these students had to be educated in general education classrooms. “Our whole district has shifted into this partnership,” says MacAllister. “We’re all talking and collaborating—and our main conversation is about all students, whether its academic, social-emotional, or behavioral. We’re saying all of our kids are all of our kids. The silos are down.”

As part of this partnership, the leadership at Orange supports its teachers to succeed in inclusive settings through focused and recurring professional development. Every year staff participate in trainings with Marilyn Friend, an international co-teaching expert, and from Educational Consultant Katie Novak on UDL. The district also takes advantage of the more local talents of CalState Fullerton professor Emeritus Belinda Karge and Wendy Murawski from the Department of Special Education at CalState Northridge.

A Foundation in Preschool
Brett Tippets, the prekindergarten coordinator, was a key leader in the first stage of Orange’s SIP rollout. She worked with staff to ensure that they were prepared “to be very well prepared” for the elementary grades. Tippets’s efforts to backwards map have paid off. “It’s why our kindergarten teachers aren’t nervous about students with disabilities coming into our classrooms in the fall, because they say, ‘If they’re coming from the PreK, I know that they are prepared to be effective members of the general education classroom.”

Unions
“During those first years, inclusion was an unknown,” says Tippets. “All of the teachers were nervous about what those kids are getting. What’s coming up?” To set the stage and address concerns, the
**Orange, from p. 13**

leadership team met with the teachers union early in the SIP process. “We presented what we were thinking, how inclusion would look, and what our supports would be,” says MacAllister. She’s candid in describing the first meeting as “rough. People were very fearful of the program because this was going to change how they were going to teach in their classrooms.”

At a recent union meeting, the tone was “very different,” says Beggs. “It was clear that now our teachers know that inclusion is what’s right for kids, and they want to be inclusive. Now it’s how, ‘How am I going to best support all of my students? Do we need to do more co-teaching? Do we need to incorporate a learning center? It’s more a systems conversation.”

**Flexibility**

The district’s overall plan was to first prepare staff at the preschool level, and then systematically introduce inclusive classrooms into one new grade each year. Next year, inclusion will extend into third grade in all elementary schools throughout Orange. “Sara and our team go to every elementary school in May,” says MacAllister, “to give principals and teachers the information and support they need.”

“I have been so pleased with the team,” says Mahoney. “Inclusion is here. It’s not going away, and SIP is an important part of that.” There is a new wrinkle to that focus. Orange has been awarded a Scale Up MTSS Statewide (SUMS) grant. “MTSS will help us shift our mindset from inclusion as a special education function, to inclusion as a feature of general education, where ‘all means all. How do we perfectly blend and blend these things together? That’s what I’m excited about.”

“When I helped write the draft for our [SUMS] grant,” says MacAllister, “we decided to tie that social-emotional piece and behavior with the SIP and the students being integrated in the classroom.” This coordination of resources supports in a system is what essentially defines MTTS. “The trainings that we’re doing already will continue,” she says, because of the SUMS. “It’s become clear that we’re already doing a lot of these things,” agrees Lew. “MTSS is just a way to bring it all together—and maybe get rid of some of things that we don’t need really—so that we have that one goal that we’re working on, which is supporting every single kid.”

“I have been so pleased with the team,” says MacAllister, “and I’m so excited that we’re now tying the SIP to MTSS. When that came out, we had to sign up. It’s like a bow on everything.”

**Being Flexible**

When Amy Dunlap, principal of Evergreen Elementary School, first introduced the ideas of inclusion and co-teaching to her staff, they told her, “Here are ten different ways to do it. Talk in your grade levels about how each of these [ways] might work.” When asked why she gave her teachers so much latitude, she explains, “The teachers have to have buy-in to our school. They have to own it.” Each group of grade-level teachers applying a different approach to inclusion, she believes that in time the best model will prove itself. Danae Popovich, principal at Camino Grove Elementary, is using a student-centered approach to inclusion. She has to operate with the resources we have,” she says. “The school plans to adjust and adapt, depending on the needs of the students. As a result, inclusive efforts will be ‘manifested differently at each site,” says Katherine Mahoney, the district’s director of special education. At Orange USD, inclusion and co-teaching began in preschool and is being expanded into a new grade each year, next year extending from preschool to third. A team of inclusion specialists visits each school in May. “We also, the district’s executive director of special education, “to give principals and teachers the information and support they need.” But what those meetings look like is “different for each school site,” McAllister believes that the flexibility given to each site “to do what they’re ready for” is what has secured “stakeholder buy-in.”

For more about SUMS, go to: https://www.myidatalkboard.org/portal/default/GroupViewers/GroupView/action?gid=6801

---

**Arcadia, from p. 12**

Disabilities are declining, particularly in the categories of speech and language impairment and learning disabilities at some of the elementary schools. The teachers are finding their own skills sharpened as well. “As I’ve become more familiar with the general education curriculum for math,” says Stephanie Brown, an RSP teacher who works in inclusive settings, “I see how students are being taught. Then I can understand better why our kids are struggling and can target the gaps. That’s where it’s benefiting the whole.” Brown also uses what she’s learned in the inclusive classroom to help students who come to her for more intense support. “It gives me a chance to go over what was covered in the general education class, and I break down those concepts more individually.”

**Collaboration**

Mahoney views her position “as a kind of microcosm of the whole. If I feel isolated, I know that my special education teachers feel isolated.” Clearly they are not. Special education staff are part of “all decisions being made about staffing and resources.” That kind of administrative inclusion doesn’t exist everywhere. “I kind of was shocked that I was already at the table” her first day on the job at Arcadia. “I was expected to be there. So I don’t have to go to Miwok. We need to do this SIP. It’s important.” Her general education colleagues—the cabinet members, directors of educational and fiscal services, and the chief technology officer—“are essentially the math curriculum or the new standards. The SIP was one of our ten initiatives, and it was listed right along with everything else.”

**Benefits**

“Dr. Villa talks about the Circle of Community,” says Mahoney, “and how within that circle there’s belonging and generosity. Often our kids with disabilities often don’t know how to be generous with others” because they are so accustomed to being “receivers of help. So going into a general education classroom, they can help answer a question for a peer is a huge self-esteem boost for them.”

With improved self-esteem has come improved behavior. “Our suspension rate overall and the behavior of students with disabilities has decreased.” So far, we’ve started our co-teaching classes,” says Mahoney. Teachers have suggested to her that, “this year we may have to go to the state. OK for them to act inappropriately in their small segregated settings ‘with kids they’ve been with since third grade. But when you’re in a general education setting, you might land in any of one seven sections. One of the exciting pieces of feedback that we received when we started doing a co-taught algebra class is that our kids were outperforming some of the other kids in that class. Our kids had never before had that experience of positive social pressure—of wanting to know things and be better than someone else. And they realized that they had to advocate for themselves, not just sit back and not know; they studied hard, put in more effort, raised their hands more, and asked more questions.”

**Inclusion and the LCAP**

Arcadia’s inclusion efforts have informed the district’s LCAPs, but more holistically, according to Mahoney. While MTSS and UDL are highlighted in the district’s plans, “each of our district initiatives is braided together with inclusive practices. But it’s not a line item for a particular subgroup. The district’s plans also place a school counselor at every elementary site. “This project was able to provide us, “Mahoney. “We have the inclusive mindset, “ says Mahoney, “and I’m so excited that we’ve gone far beyond what the SIP project was able to provide us.” She talks about the SIP grant as “a great starting point—it seeded money for those larger things that are taking hold in the district.”

**Current Implementation**

Since the SIP, Arcadia’s LRE numbers have improved, although Mahoney still sees LRE as one of the district’s biggest challenges. “We have room for growth. Not everything always goes well, and we haven’t yet met our target.” But she’s not done yet. “We’ve focused on leadership, and then on the experts who would be in the classroom making things happen in a different way.”

Next step is to “focus more on the general education teachers.” She would like to see “every single teacher going through a UDL training.” When asked about the current level of implementation for inclusive practices, Popovich says, “We have always work to do. And I have seen a dramatic change.” She says the push to a circular approach for teaching and practices she is coordinating just at Camino Grove: inclusion and co-teaching, competency-based learning, formative assessments, personalized learning, response to intervention, restorative practices, and more. The long list is framed beneath the umbrella of UDL and in service “to the end of decreasing those boundaries.”

Popovich says she doesn’t think too much about the SIP as a separate initiative. “We’re doing this because it’s the right thing to do for kids. We know that when we plan for the margins, we’re planning best—for high, for low, for struggling, for our behaviors.” With spots for students with disabilities, “We’re actually doing a better job of planning for all kids.”
When I came on board in 2015, we had five facilitators who were paid an hourly rate. They were amazing, but they also had other full-time jobs and couldn’t get out to support our districts. We knew we had to build better capacity. I said, “Let’s come up with regional hubs of support across the state.”

Brooks’ idea to develop these hubs included identifying and deploying what the project calls exemplar sites. “Districts learn from other districts,” she says. Her vision was to match a struggling LEA with an exemplary one so that efforts to improve inclusion could be guided by people who had already addressed challenges in this area and had realized success; they could provide practical, hands-on support.

The project has evolved further by bringing on university partners this past year. “We knew that we needed ongoing research to back up what we do,” says Brooks. “We also needed clear messaging about the pre-service piece. Teacher candidates have to know about inclusion from the get-go so that when we place them in these communities that we’re trying to change, they have that same foundational understanding of inclusive practices.

Project Evolution

The project continued to change and expand. In 2016 the Special Education Division acquired a new director in Kristin Wright, a long-time advocate of quality inclusive preschools. And in 2017 the SELPA director was re-invited and reaffirmed its 2015 policy statement on inclusion. In response, the SED solidified its commitment to the SIP project and refocused it on preschool LRE. Research is beginning to show the lasting benefits of inclusive preschools and their influence in spreading inclusive practices into the later grades—“pushing up” the culture and mindset.

At the same time, the SIP project continued to include those LEAs that had begun their inclusive efforts in “other grade bands, which is why all participating LEAs don’t have preschool LRE programs,” says Hernandez. “Our directive has requested that we be flexible with this to make sure we do keep those LEAs that are promoting inclusion and the least restrictive environments, but to shift their focus to make sure they have a preschool LRE plan and to begin implementing it.” This approach of “supporting LEAs where they are” aligns with the statewide commitment to work with the strengths and resources of each locality.

She has reason to be. Together, Clay and Schaefer bring more than 40 years of experience in educational sciences. “We know the commitments to developing unified systems, growth mindset, response to intervention, and multi-tiered system of supports. Brooks welcomes their added expertise in developing inclusive cultures and promoting practices of sustainability and improvement science, especially continuous quality improvement.”

“El Dorado’s commitment is not just to improvement but to designing new inclusive models,” says Clay, precisely echoing the profile of the SIP. Schaefer emphasizes the importance of approaching his work with the SIP “not just from the special education perspective, but through the work that we’ve done developing an understanding from the general education perspective.” Making general education an integral part of inclusive practices is critical, he says, because “that’s where a lot of the decisions are made.” How general education and special education collaborate in the pre-referral process for example, significantly influences the success of “incorporating students across the system,” he says. “And that impacts special education—positively or negatively.”

He and Clay are aiming for the positive. “This SIP work aligns so perfectly,” says Clay, with the California School Dashboard, the state’s new school and district accountability tool, which will be used to identify LEAs for the SIP and connect them to the larger system of support and improvement being developed by CDE. “The timing for this SIP expansion is ideal.”

Alignment with the Statewide System of Support

The many changes in California’s system of support through the last five years reflect efforts to realize the vision of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). The LCFF and its corresponding accountability framework were designed to improve outcomes for all students, but especially for those who historically underperformed—or students with disabilities included. The California Statewide System of Support undergirds all LCFF efforts to improve outcomes for students by providing a coherent and coordinated array of resources and services to help LEAs strengthen their efforts to meet the needs of each student, build internal capacity to sustain improvements, and address inequities in opportunities and outcomes.

With decades of research confirming the effectiveness of well-executed inclusive practices in improving the school performance of all students, the effort to promote these practices becomes the proverbial “no-brainer.” In addition, the SIP serves as an example of coherence within the System of Support: through its collaborative model of working with—not mandating that things get done to or for—LEAs, its attention to leveraging existing strengths and resources to address fundamental challenges; and its general flexibility in how work gets done on local level, needs, and districts. These qualities all reflect the approach that is being used within the other elements of this Statewide System of Support: the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), the California Superintendent’s Educational Services Association (CCSESA) regions, the CDE’s and CDE’s new monitoring protocols. These organizations and initiatives are all working together to develop mutually supportive approaches and similar vocabularies to “equip educators with the knowledge of what we need to do—what’s good for kids and what research shows,” says Brooks. And as CDE implements its Statewide System of Support throughout the state, the SIP is an example of “aligning with the CSSESA regions, so we hope with all of them by 2020–2021,” expanding even further the project’s reach and capacity to coordinate its efforts with LEAs.

The advent of the California School Dashboard has also changed how LEAs will be chosen for the SIP. Through the Dashboard, “we know about the 163 districts in the red” for the achievement scores of students with disabilities, says Brooks. These low scores make the LEAs eligible for Differentiated Assistance, the second tier of support that the state provides. Consultants at CDE will be working with Brooks and her colleagues to select the next cohort of SIP sites. “We have much work to do together across the state,” she says. “Sometimes it does seem like triaging, but with the huge sense of urgency, we’re going to make sure to help districts move out of the red. And our students need and deserve our help now.”

Source of Commitment

Brooks is committed to training, encouraging, and supporting anyone who wants to learn about inclusion—inside or outside of the SIP project. “If there’s a need for trainings but no funds, I show up when I can,” she says.

“I guess my commitment comes from my own personal struggles as a child in a single-parent household. I was diagnosed with epilepsy when I was very young. I remember the doctor telling my mother that I would never be able to play organized sports or get better than a C average. My mom didn’t accept that. I was diagnosed with epilepsy when I was very young. I remember the doctor telling my mother that I would never be able to play organized sports or get better than a C average. My mom didn’t accept that. And that’s probably what drove me to be the overachiever that I think I’ve become: straight A student, played club soccer in high school and all through college. “I’ve since grown out of epilepsy. But the experience has taught me that we can’t limit kids based on a diagnosis.”

No adult can honestly say to a child of five that “this is what you’re going to become.”

“I would like to see us all strive to see the best in all of our kids and help them realize their full potential—something that I know will be within our reach. We can work to support changes to the educational system so that every kid has the best shot.”

Becoming a SIP Site

All of the districts currently participating in the Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) project were invited to apply for a SIP grant because they did not meet the state’s goals in the Annual Performance Report (APR).

“The APR is an accountability tool of the federal Office of Special Education Programs. In order to be eligible for federal IDEA dollars, states must fulfill certain obligations to ensure that the money they receive is being spent properly. The indicators in the APR reflect the state’s fulfillment of those obligations and its overall success in its efforts. The SIP specifically targets three of the indicators of how students with disabilities are being educated in general education settings: Indicator 3 (the participation and performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessments), Indicator 5 (the amount of time students with disabilities receive their instruction in general education classrooms); and Indicator 6 (the percent of preschool children with IEPs who received special education and related services in settings with typically developing peers).

The SIP sites are interested in a great deal more than just improving their performance on the indicators. They are making important changes to provide a challenging, inclusive school experience for all students, preparing them for career and/or college and adult life—while meeting their APR goals.
someone says, ‘I don’t understand how a Chime, achieve educational goals. “So when disagreement about “to include or not a belief in kids. I find that people who any resistance to inclusion “is not about have to happen in order for stakeholders effective ways to support all learners in this is not extra work. This is the kind of making it personal. “The challenge for educators, has to do with how our current teachers were trained and how that creating conflict with what is known about best practices for inclusion. “I’m asking you to fundamentally envision something else.

Inclusive Models

That vision, of course, is full inclusion, and Studer remains committed to it because of its proven efficacy: educational and social growth for all students—as well as its social components. He is a known advocate for the “burn your ships” model, where all separate settings and pull-out practices are eliminated, so that everyone knows “we’re not going back. One year a school is not inclusive and the next year it is.” He has, however, a depth of experience that keeps him from being too about “the best way.” He acknowledges that “a slow-growth model is possible. I have seen schools go both ways. You want to do it, though, all teachers that everyone understands that there is a vision for what this looks like when you’re done, and that everyone knows when you’re done. You want to set a point and then reasonable benchmarks that you measure yourselves by as you go through this process.” He also cautions about just “getting pockets of agreement—a few teachers here who want to do it, and a few more over there—and you plan to highlight their successes and see who else wants to join. I’m not saying that this isn’t important, but there is a danger in this approach of not progressing fast enough. We become victims of attrition and start to lose the people who were part of the initiative in the first place. There has to be some sense of urgency to any change process. And if there isn’t urgency for change, I think your initiative to say, ‘Well, we’re going to do that next year.’ “For me part of the urgency always has been that, if we take five years to do this, there are five years worth of kids who didn’t benefit. Whatever grade a kid is in, that’s his only year in that grade.”

Coordinating Initiatives

The statewide efforts to develop a uniquely California version of MTSS and to align all systems so that they benefit all students within each LEA echo what CHIME has tried to do from its very beginning. At CHIME, all school decisions and activities are made and designed around five core principles: universal design for learning (UDL), co-teaching, positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), professional learning, and a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. These principles could be held up as an “MTSS top five,” and they guide decisions at CHIME—from the administration office to each classroom. Studer provides recurring professional development in each. “I almost feel like these orienting philosophies are how we align our MTSS strategy. I don’t know if UDL is a system of support or if it is how we orient ourselves to instruction so that those other things, that we’re doing in our classrooms, are embedded in that UDL framework. But this is how the parts of your MTSS system all end up being in alignment: your entire program is oriented around core philosophies.”

Studer is unequivocal in his insistence on the importance of having core principles. Without clarity in what they are and their application, he argues, there is struggle with conceptualizing this alignment within MTSS. They end up tinkering at the activity level or the department or person level” and fail to make systemic, sustainable, coherent improvement.

Creating Capacity

For schools and districts that are “focused on creating more inclusive opportunities for kids,” Studer stresses the importance of building capacity. “It takes time for teachers to work together collaboratively and develop materials. And if I think I’m going to do this and still run the same old professional development schedule that I’ve been running for the past five years, then I’m crazy. It’s ultimately a question of how you’re going to schedule and how you’re going to ask them to work. This falls a lot in the special education department. No one questions whether we should have general education classrooms. The question is, ‘Are we going to have special education classrooms?’ And if so, ‘How many and for how long?’ I know that not every district in California is going to make that same decision that we made: zero for zero amount of time. But we need them to trend towards a zero ratio.” These efforts and decisions, Studer believes, directly involve scheduling “not students but staff. Wherever you put the adults, that’s where the kids have to be. So if you take teachers and don’t give them four periods of RSP in a day and instead give them four periods of co-teaching, by definition kids will now be included. In some way, that’s an ideologue. Studer knows all about the “bumps and hurdles” along the way, and the need to “build the capacity in people” so that they can do “the work” and keep their classrooms rather than in segregated RSP or SDC settings. “So there’s probably some arguments to be made for how we stage and group and schedule students, especially in the special education department. But if you say that in five years we’re going to be a school district that meets the federal definition of inclusion, where 100 percent of our students are included 80 percent of the time or more, you can map backwards from there and have a clear beginning and an end, with goals to measure yourself by. And maybe you’re not there by the end of five years. But you can put yourself on the path.”

Covina-Valley, from p. 10

High Expectations

Parry believes that the more inclusion becomes the norm for students with disabilities, “the greater data changes we’re going to see. As it’s brand new, some kids are still adjusting to it.” Among all students in general education classrooms, he says, some pass and some fail. He believes that the same expectation should be held for students with disabilities. And he speaks to all students in the same straightforward way: When his special educators want to “save” a student with disabilities from failing, “I argue that, if they can see the work—and we’ve determined that they are capable of performing in that class—then that’s where they belong. And if they’re not performing? Well, you can’t qualify for special education because of laziness or lack of effort. So we need to figure out how to better support and motivate that student.” An important school in its approach to the “real work of education” is that “there are consequences for not doing your work. But we’re seeing more and more students recognize that they can compete. They know that the expectation is high, and that this is an a–g college prep course. A very high percentage of our students with disabilities are rising to the occasion.”

Sustainability

The SIP districts are under no illusion that the money they received from the grant will last forever. Consequently, building the capacity and sustained inclusive practices is a goal for each site, according to SIP Director Kristin Knows. Some districts have addressed issues of sustainability by first training their district leaders. “They’re the decision makers, the resource givers,” says Katherine Mahoney of Arcadia USD. “And [inclusion] has to be sustainable beyond the $30,000 of the grant.” Other districts have spent years developing their model of expertise.

“Our focus has always been to develop internal capacity,” says Elizabeth Emunizer of Covina-Valley USD, by nurturing talent within the district. With the SIP, this means providing professional development on co-teaching, UDL, and research proven practices that support inclusion. Covina Valley’s Ryan Parry talks about the many advantages of having in-house expertise. “When you bring people in, they fly in; they fly out. Some of it’s great, but they’re not here tomorrow.” With internal training capacity, “if a teacher comes back the next day needing clarification, they know they can pick up a phone and get an answer, or even someone to show up at their door.” The other advantage Parry sees is that the district’s own training team, the conversant with the local initiatives and principles, and understand how as they fit together. “Now we have 20 years of learning in that space, and they’re all aiming for the same vision, toward the same goal.”
A Model for Inclusion: CHIME Charter Elementary School

The CHIME Charter Elementary School has served as model for the Supporting Inclusive Practices (SIP) project since 2013, when the project started. And for good reason. At CHIME, every student receives instruction and services in general education settings. The school has never used pull-out programs for speech and language services, resource specialist programs (RSP), or segregated classrooms for special day classes (SDC). “We have the privilege here to be incredibly clear and coherent about who we are,” says CHIME Director Erin Studer. “We are a demonstration site for full inclusion. That is why we were started, and that is why we continue to exist.”

The leadership at CHIME executes this charter by studying “what the research says about creative, inclusive educational environments, and trying to put it into practice to serve all kids,” says Studer. As a result, CHIME is that rare place that operates out of a singular, coherent inclusive vision, with “all of the parts working all at once.”

Involvement with SIP

While this founding principle of inclusion makes CHIME an obvious choice as an exemplar site for the SIP, it isn’t the only reason. “The other piece,” says Studer, “is that our student population allows us to demonstrate the full range of students who might come to a school and be included. About 20 percent of our kids have special needs—that’s much higher than average. And right around 40 percent of those are students with low-incidence disabilities.” Low-incidence refers to the more rarely occurring disabilities—such as severe vision, hearing, or orthopedic disabilities—that typically require more intense supports. This percentage “is also much higher [at CHIME] than you would find in your typical public school. So if we can be fully inclusive here, with our numbers and our student ratios, it’s possible in any other district or school setting.”

Since its inception, CHIME has provided training on inclusion to teams of educators from across the country. “And we have been fortunate to have several school districts in the SIP project be part of the three-day training that we put on each fall,” says Studer. These trainings address the “why” of inclusion as well as the “how”: sustainability, teacher contracts and assignments, student and classroom scheduling, co-teaching strategies, professional learning communities, and professional development.

Importance of Administrative Leaders

“When we provide those trainings, I always say to the administrators, ‘I’m going to be hardest on you. You’re the ones who have to hold out the vision for this, who have to make the guiding decisions that will bring the school or the district closer to your inclusive vision.’ Ultimately,” explains Studer, “there are two reasons for this. First, leadership makes decisions about things that no one else gets to decide. Teachers don’t get to decide budget. In many places, teachers don’t get to decide student schedules or room assignments. These are all the brass tacks kinds of things that administrators decide and that are core to the operation of a school. And second, if these things aren’t decided based on the core principles of inclusion—universal design, co-teaching, positive behavioral supports, no pull-out, and no segregated SDC—then there’s nothing the teachers can do.

(CHIME, continued on page 18)