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When All Really Means All: Schools of Promise, School Reform, and Innovative Professional Development

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Imagine schools in which all self-contained settings, resource rooms, pullout programs, and overloaded or cluster classrooms for students with disabilities are eliminated. Each classroom now has a balance of student needs and *all* teachers are responsible for teaching *all* students. In addition to students having increased access to peers and the general education curriculum, these schools have experienced promising achievement gains.

SCHOOLS OF PROMISE

This chapter focuses on an inclusive whole-school reform project titled Schools of Promise (SOP). The SOP approach is designed to harness the integration of school resources (Frattura & Capper, 2007), the power of inclusive practices (Peterson & Hittie, 2003) with aspects of effective whole-school reform (Edmonds, 1979; Fashola & Slavin, 1998), and a school district-university partnership (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Holmes Group, 1990; Teitel, 2004).

SOP is a partnership between Syracuse University School of Education and local school districts that provides an innovative example of teacher inservice. This partnership aims to improve elementary schools for all students, particularly those students who have traditionally not been successful in schools: students with disabilities, English language learners,

students of color, and students from low-income families. SOP is essentially about inclusive school reform. At its core, SOP centers on issues of belonging and creating school structures, staffing plans, schedules, class placements, teaching teams, and daily instruction that are designed to include *all* students in the general education setting.

SCHOOLS OF PROMISE BACKGROUND

Consider the history of segregation in public schools and the history of separation in special education as a backdrop to this chapter. Pair that with the current pressures to target instruction and to remediate students when schools are faced with diverse learning needs in order to raise achievement on state tests (Huefner, 2000; Reese, 2005). In light of these educational realities, researchers argue that success for all students requires a proactive, whole-school approach (Frattura & Capper, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Theoharis, 2009).

This means recognizing that there are and will be a range of learners and learning challenges or strengths within any school. A proactive, whole-school approach implies using existing resources and staff to meet those needs by building collaborative support in general education that improves the educational experience for all students. This is a direct contrast to the approach used to address students who struggle in many schools. Often this involves waiting for students to fail and using resources reactively and in a targeted manner to remediate for some, removing them from their peers and general education classrooms, while other students receive no additional support.

SOP began with a planning process that was facilitated by the university faculty that involved teachers and administrators reconfiguring the use of staff to create teams of specialists and general education teachers to collaboratively plan and deliver instruction to heterogeneous student groups. This resulted in all students (including students with significant disabilities, students with mild disabilities, students with emotional disabilities, students with autism . . . *all* students) being placed into inclusive classrooms with their supports and services delivered to them seamlessly in the context of general education. Through this partnership, the entire

school team received professional development and support for three years (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2010).

INNOVATIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The SOP partnership involved examining and redeploying school resources, which necessitated multiple levels of ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators. It was important to see that this school reform was not only about students with disabilities; this was about *all* students through a focus on creating systems and learning to raise achievement and create a sense of belonging.

Innovative professional development through the SOP partnership involved:

1. Gaining an authentic understanding of the system and use of resources, and creating plans to use human resources to match the goals of inclusion and belonging for all;
2. Offering university graduate courses on site for graduate students and practicing teachers;
3. Embedding professional development initiatives within goals of inclusion and belonging (science lesson study, writing projects);
4. Developing authentic collaborative instructional teams;
5. Problem solving and mentoring with administrators and instructional teams; and
6. Leading conversations with the entire faculty.

Understanding the System and Creating Plans to Use Human Resources Differently

For each SOP, the first step was that the university faculty facilitated the school staff in the development of goals relating to belonging, inclusion, and access. Examples of these brainstormed goal statements include:

- Students in balanced classrooms with positive role models.
- Students do not leave to learn.

- Purposefully built classroom and school climates that are warm and welcoming for children and staff and fosters active/engaging learning.
- Child-centered, differentiated, research-based instruction that challenges children of all abilities, supported by targeted staff development.

After the goals were decided, the next step in the SOP partnership was to complete a visual map of how the school was using resources. This involved creating visuals of how teachers and assistance were arranged and deployed, and where students with disabilities were served and by whom. For an example of this, see figure 10.1.

Many school staff had never considered the macro view of their school. Given the daily pressing realities of teaching, they did not have the opportunity to understand the ways in which the school operated as a system. Thus, this process offered a practical, hands-on way for teachers and staff to gain new understanding of the school. For example, in the school depicted in figure 10.1, the teachers involved in the process commented, “I had no idea we had 10.5 special education teachers” and “this map [of

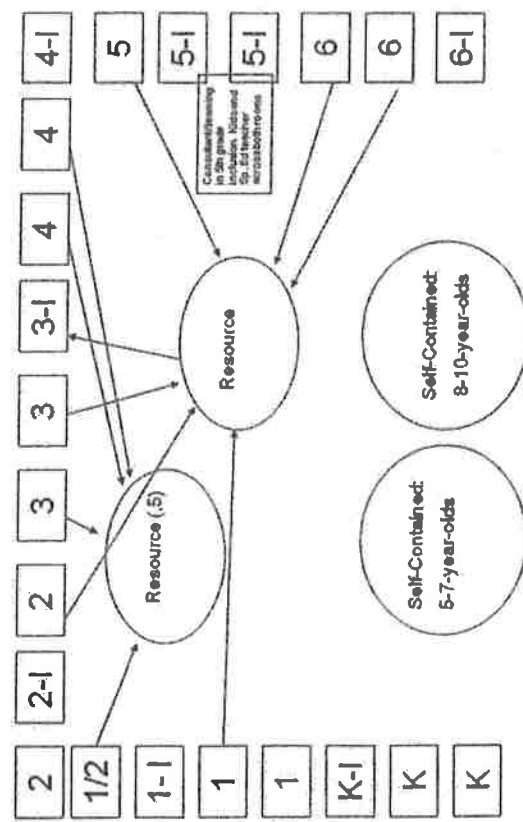


Figure 10.1. Visual Representation of Summer Heights K-6 School: Service Delivery/Use of Human Resources for Students with Disabilities

the services] gives me a picture of why I feel overwhelmed by the needs in my class.”

Following the creation of a visual map of how services were offered, the staff created plans for redeploying resources to better meet the SOP developed goals. This engaged school staff members in learning about the school as a system and in turn they recognized that a focused alignment of resources was needed to meet the goals of the school. The faculty at the school depicted in figure 10.1 chose to redeploy their resources as depicted in figure 10.2.

This restructuring used the 10.5 special education teachers in new ways. All students were placed and became members of the general education classrooms, keeping in mind the idea of creating balanced classrooms without an overload of students with disabilities. This eliminated pullout services and self-contained programs and allowed for the teachers previously assigned to work in those programs to collaborate and co-teach. All teachers—general education and special education—currently collaborate, co-teach, and plan together about how to meet the range of needs in their classroom.

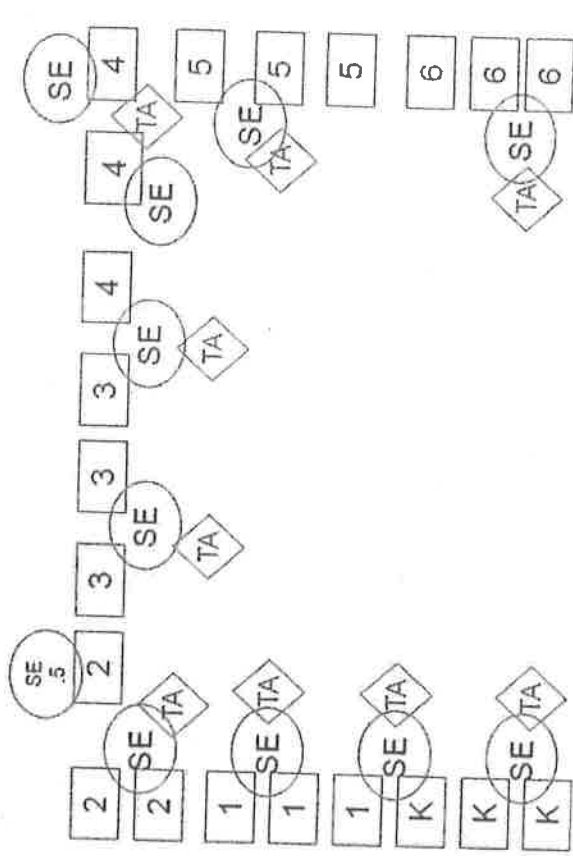


Figure 10.2. Visual Representation of Summer Heights School: Revised Service Delivery and Redeployment of Human Resources

This process of creating new service delivery and redeploying human resources gave the school staff insight about how to align resources with priorities. Every spring this process is now part of the yearly planning for the upcoming school year—how to allocate staff to meet the needs of students through the lens of their inclusive vision.

Offering Innovative University Graduate Courses On-Site

During the first year of implementation of the restructured services, the university offered an on-site graduate course titled *Collaboration for Inclusive Schooling* at the SOP. Before SOP, this course was only offered at the university and only for graduate students. For the SOP partnership, the location of the course moved to the SOP schools and opened to inservice teachers as well as graduate students. The population of the class consisted of thirty graduate students in the school of education taking the course for university credit and thirty inservice teachers from the SOP schools receiving professional development credit and not paying university tuition.

The purpose of the course was to explore a variety of strategies for professionals to collaborate in order to promote the learning of all elementary students. The course participants examined how general and special education teachers plan and teach collaboratively and focused on best practices for differentiation of curriculum. They explored different ways to collaborate with other professionals, young people, and families, and identified benefits and complexities of collaboration. Additionally, they reconsidered traditional adult roles in inclusive school settings. Further, they practiced strategies in the area of communication, running effective team meetings, creative problem solving, and conflict resolution.

The format of offering the class at one of the SOP sites and combining university graduate students with SOP teachers who took the class for school district professional development hours enabled the practicing teachers to work with university faculty to learn how to collaborate effectively. The course professors worked to create a classroom community where both groups of participants (SOP teachers and university graduate students) worked together on group assignments. Additionally, it allowed the university students to learn alongside teachers in the field who were

challenged by the daily issues of teaching. The learning by both groups was greatly enhanced by the presence of the other.

Developing Collaborative Instructional Teams

Another important feature of the SOP partnership was that the university faculty sat with the school teams to provide support as they placed students in classrooms for the upcoming school year. During this student placement process, the schools' inclusive goals were displayed visually, so that the decisions were made with respect to those goals. Next, the group determined the collaborative instructional teams. For example, two general education teachers, one special education teacher, and one paraprofessional might be responsible for teaching two classrooms of students. These teams ultimately learned to co-plan and co-teach together.

One of the benefits of the formation of these teams was that not only did they receive professional development instruction about how to work together as a team, but they also shared their expertise with each other. For example, general educators learned about modifying and adapting, and special educators became familiar with the fourth-grade content, as they were responsible for co-teaching and co-modifying the curriculum. This partnership developed an increased capacity in the teachers to work with all students.

Embedding Other Professional Development Initiatives within Goals of Inclusion and Belonging

The SOP partnership created a focus at the participating schools on issues of belonging and inclusion. This focus was kept central as each school engaged in other professional development initiatives. For example, two years into the SOP partnership, many of the staff at one school began to participate in a professional development initiative on elementary science. This involved rethinking how they taught science and the ways they engaged students in science.

The university faculty leading the elementary science professional development worked with the school staff to incorporate the new learning

as an extension of the SOP partnership. As they rethought the ways they brought science into their classrooms, this meant they engaged in planning to differentiate and meet the range of learners' needs inclusively. There was no distinction between the SOP inclusive reform and the science learning; they worked together to enhance teaching and learning for all students in heterogeneous classrooms.

Another school focused on improving their teaching and learning of writing. Again, this became a complement of SOP and not something that was happening separately from newly created heterogeneous classrooms. A member of the SOP team met with the grade-level teams weekly as they were learning and working on writing instruction in order to help maintain the focus on serving all students inclusively.

By the end of the first year of this writing focus, the teachers were amazed at the gains in writing for students they initially were hesitant about including. For example, a boy who according to the teachers was "unable to express his thoughts, he has no ideas" and was "way too low academically to engage in 5th grade writing" was included in the heterogeneous project. For the final project, he wrote a book about the careers he is interested in pursuing. One of the teachers reflected, "I would never in a million years have thought he could have even participated in this writing, and his writing has developed so much."

These two examples demonstrated the power of harnessing other professional development initiatives through the goals of the SOP partnership. While specific learning took part to enhance the collaborative skills and abilities to differentiate, in part SOP was seen and was described as "not one more thing on the plate, but *the* plate." Infusing other professional development activities into the SOP goals was one way inclusion and belonging became *the plate* and not an add-on or an extra program, but rather a driving force for the school and all the learning that happened there.

Problem Solving with Administrators and Instructional Teams

A key aspect of the SOP partnership was how the university team responded to the needs of teaching and administrative teams as issues arose. This took diverse forms; some examples included the following:

- University faculty observed students with challenging behaviors and held problem-solving sessions;
- University faculty met with administrative teams to problem solve about scheduling and the participation of paraprofessionals;
- University graduate students worked weekly with instructional teams to integrate diverse co-teaching models into the weekly plan; and
- University graduate students provided short-term assistance in classrooms so staff could learn new assistive technologies.

This aspect of the partnership was certainly not scripted but evolved out of the fluid needs of the school professionals. One staff member commented that "the support we needed our first year we no longer need because we now have the skills to make decisions and adjustments with the [university SOP team] support."

Holding Whole-Staff Conversations and Learning Experiences

One of the continual aspects of the SOP partnership was that the university faculty led whole-staff conversations and learning experiences that were tailored to the needs of the school. In one school, they engaged in the topics of differentiation, modifications, and racial diversity. In another school, the conversations focused on supporting students with challenging behaviors and the involvement of paraprofessionals. Some of the discussions involved having the school staff read a book or an article prior to the discussion.

Other conversations included video examples of co-teaching or assuming competence about students with disabilities along with discussion questions. These professional exchanges served to help address upcoming concerns and also to keep all staff focused on the more noteworthy goals of the school reform effort.

CONCLUSION: RESULTS OF SCHOOLS OF PROMISE

SOP takes significant time, energy, and persistence from the university team and the participating school professionals. As with all school

reform, not everybody involved agrees with or supports this partnership, but in these schools, over 85 percent of staff and 100 percent of administrators report being *supportive of this effort* at this point in time. Many students who previously received their education in separate or self-contained settings, or who were removed from the general education setting to receive services, are now being educated with their peers by teams of professionals.

At one school, previously 42 percent of third graders were reading at grade level and now 68 percent are. Where 50 percent of fourth graders were reading at grade level two years ago, 71 percent of these same students are reading at grade level now. One school went from no students with disabilities reading at grade level to 27 percent reading at grade level. One twenty-year-veteran teacher commented, "[Schools of promise] has been exciting and rejuvenating, I feel energized like I did when I was just starting my career."

Although much progress is still needed and these reform efforts are difficult, the results are promising. We believe that the success in creating schools where all students, with no exceptions, are full members of general education classrooms and where all groups of students are achieving at higher levels comes from the many ways professional learning is embedded into the SOP partnership.

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