

Innovators of Early Education: A Santa Ana Unified School District Workgroup to Improve Early Childhood Inclusive Education

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"Mitchell staff is like, everyone is always so positive, and they can spend their days like getting beat up, you know, by tiny humans, right? Like they do all the toileting, they deal with behaviors all day long, and they still are so happy to see one another, and so happy to walk through the office. Like, they're just so positive for all of the work they do... at the end of the day, they have a smile on their face, like, just they like kids, they like working with kids"

Overview

The Mitchell Child Development Center (CDC) is a center in the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) that primarily serves children with special needs. Mitchell CDC has between 400-500 children that span a 0-5 age range. Mitchell has 38 special education preschool programs and satellite special educational preschool classes in schools across the district. Members of the Research, Evaluation and Data Inquiry team (REDI) had the opportunity to attend workgroup (titled "Innovators of Early Education") meetings that were organized by a staff member at the district office, but primarily attended by special education teachers within district both at Mitchell, its satellite campuses or other schools within the district. In addition to attending the workgroup meetings, members of the REDI team also conducted interviews and focus groups with attendees of the workgroup meeting and the district staff member organizing the workgroup. The following case study details the efforts, foci, practices, strategies and areas for future work for some of the members of this workgroup.

True Inclusion

In conversations with families and educators, the idea of what "inclusion" is, means or looks like has been somewhat of a moving target. While there are definitions provided by the state of the California on what inclusion is, or the benchmarks school districts should aim for to "achieve" inclusion, the reality is that inclusion is actualized in different ways by different groups of educators. Despite the variation across education, the attendees of the workgroup and seemingly of Mitchell as a whole were independently on the same page about what inclusion means to them. In interviews, focus groups and conversations all workgroup attendees described what inclusion meant to them without metrics or benchmarks of student time in the classroom. Instead, these educators described what inclusion looks like, what it sounds like and what it feels like to students. All the educators started the same way, by emphasizing that inclusion in their context means students with special needs and general education students are indistinguishable from one another in how they are treated and the spaces they inhabit in the classroom. One educator summed it up well by saying, *"I think a high-quality inclusive setting is where everyone belongs and you can't feel the difference between students with IEPs and students without. Really, it means that everyone, like, has a place there and feels valued"*. This sentiment reverberated through the conversations around

the way teachers teach, the ways students interact with one another and the teachers' respective philosophies of teaching.

Workgroup members who participated in focus groups and interviews described numerous examples of what true inclusion looks like and sounds like within their classrooms. They described intentional scaffolding to ensure students are working and learning together whenever possible. They described activities where all students are working on the same thing at the same time so they are able to work together, talk to one another and relate to one another. While accommodations are made for individual needs, the overarching goal is that all students learn together, interact freely, and feel like they belong. Teachers described intentionally designing activities where all students are working on the same task at the same

You walk in and you can't tell what child is what, whether they're on general ed side or if they're on the special ed side, because we treat everybody the same, with the same expectations, same rules. Of course, you're going to adapt certain things for children according to their needs and their IEP, but we also do that with the general ed side

time, allowing for organic opportunities to talk, collaborate, and form connections. These efforts are supported by scaffolding that ensures students remain in shared spaces, learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate but not isolating. True inclusion was often discussed in a social context far more than anything else. Workgroup members often referred to the ways students feel in the classroom and their sense of belonging in the classroom as their indicator of inclusion.

In conjunction with these descriptions, workgroup members also would describe the teaching practices they would use to cultivate this sense of belonging in small, but impactful ways. For example, one teacher described how she and her co-teacher would work together in their lesson planning to ensure they were collecting the data they needed for DRDPs or IEP accountability while keeping students in the classroom. One teacher said, *"the kids don't like you to pull them out or play...So, we decided, okay, why don't we make a small [group] like one of our rotations, just for the story and retelling...So, she takes her data and check my data also at the same time, and it's part of our part of our weekly lesson plan, we embedded this"*. This example showcases how student position, student time and respect for students are elements at the forefront on her mind. By integrating assessments and targeted instruction into their weekly lesson plans, they preserve classroom unity while still meeting accountability requirements. These seemingly small choices reflect a larger commitment: treating every child's time and presence in the classroom as valuable and equal. Over time, these decisions foster an environment where all students are known, included, and respected.

Finally, the members of the workgroup are passionate about the benefits of a true inclusion model for students with special needs and general education students. For students with special needs, they believe that true inclusion in this way provides students with special needs role models in social emotional and academic domains. They often referenced examples where students with special needs' vocabulary enhanced, their willingness to socialize increased and in general they had peers who they were excited to be at school with. Importantly, these teachers also emphasized the benefits for general education students as well. They independently named the same benefits for general education students: empathy

and emotional intelligence. General education students learning alongside peers who are special needs students provides them the opportunity to learn about differences at a young age and to understand differences do not define us.

So it's, you know, they work with the child that has special needs, but it's just amazing to see how, you know, they can connect with them, make that friendship, relationship, and know that we are all different and it's okay

The Co-Teaching Model

The members of the workgroup acknowledged that inclusion takes on many different forms and can be implemented in several ways. The most discussed and popular method for members of the workgroup was a co-teaching model where a special education educator and a general education educator teach the same class at the same time. The educators in the workgroup touted this model as *the* model for full inclusion classrooms. They discussed their years of experience co-teaching and the benefits of the model such as: strong educator collaboration, a supportive figure within the classroom and the belief that co-teaching generally supports better teaching practices. For example, one of the members described how by having a co-teacher it requires both teachers to have clear goals and objectives for their students since they are also managing the needs of their co-teacher, “[TEACHER NAME], we plan together. That's a huge key. We plan together. What would you want to do? What do you think your general students need? What about the special ed side? What do they all need to succeed? And we just plan together. You know? We do it bi-weekly”.

In addition to planning, the teachers also described how this co-teaching model promotes flexibility throughout the school day and asks them to balance their needs with that of their co-teacher to ensure both educators are doing what they need to do. The teachers talked about this flexibility in a positive light, discussing how it helps them to improve their practice and see all the students in the class as their students. Many of the teachers also talked about their relationship with their co-teacher and how it has evolved into a true partnership over time. They described this partnership as one of security, safety and reliability. One teacher described their partner as, “I joke around with my husband, it's like a second marriage because it's been eight years, you know?”, showcasing the deep trust they have in one another. This partnership builds a relationship that means these teachers have a person to bounce ideas off of, someone who “has their back” throughout the day and someone to rely on. For them, co-teaching is not simply a logistical arrangement—it is a philosophy of shared responsibility, mutual support, and collective ownership of all students. By pairing a general education and special education teacher in one classroom, co-teaching creates the conditions for students to learn side-by-side without separation or stigma. Educators emphasized how this model enables real-time collaboration, responsive teaching, and more holistic attention to the diverse needs of students.

Despite the benefits to the co-teaching model, the members of the workgroup also recognized that there are numerous conditions for success. They discussed how co-teaching should not be adopted lightly, or taken on by a teacher group with preparation and an

understanding of what it entails. The following are common key pieces they identified to the success of a co-teaching model.

1. **Strong Educator Understanding and Buy-in.** Educators in the workgroup often discussed that an important part of more educators buying-in to the co-teaching model is a deeper understanding of what it entails. Several educators thought a good way to generate buy-in is to have other educators come into their classrooms to view their co-teaching or at least watch a video of co-teaching in action, *"I think if you even at least the video tape a day or a session, and then go from there, like use it for training purposes and say, this is a day, take a look. Tell me, what do you think? So, I think that's one of the things they need to see to see it... and then we tell them, okay, this is how we deal with this is how we do this. I think talking is not going to be beneficial as much as they need to see it"*. Members of the workgroup hold the belief that co-teaching can seem intimidating or more difficult than a single teacher classroom and that these perceptions are primarily driven by a "fear of the unknown". This was especially prevalent in conversations around, "managing difficult student behaviors". Members of the workgroup have the perception that one barrier to co-teaching will be educator concern over managing difficult student behaviors and in particular the behaviors of students with special needs. The educators in the workgroup, and their general education co-teachers felt that these concerns may be mitigated or lowered if general education teachers were able to see co-teaching in action.
2. **Classroom Control.** One of the other barriers to adoption of the co-teaching model that members of the workgroup anticipated was a loss of classroom control. Members of the workgroup often noted that many educators prefer to have control over the agenda, timing and atmosphere of their classroom and that the co-teaching model removes a degree of that control. Teachers expressed sympathy and understanding for educators who are hesitant to co-teach and would often express sentiments like, *"it's just difficult. It's hard because you, you want your classroom to be a certain way, and having to share the classroom with someone else, it's like, well, wait a minute, I want to do what I want to do"*. The members of the workgroup who expressed this potential barrier felt a solution to it was to emphasize the benefits of co-teaching and that with less control also comes more support. Co-teaching, for these educators, meant someone to support them and to have a person who complements their teaching strengths and weaknesses, *"My partner's very organized. I'm not that organized, I mean, I make it happen, you know, I know [CLASSROOM ITEMS ARE] somewhere, but she's just very well organized, and I think that has helped me as well"*.
3. **Training on Co-Teaching.** Related to buy-in, educators in the workgroup also saw training on what high-quality co-teaching looks like as a key piece of successful implementation. The educators within the workgroup have vast knowledge of strong practices around inclusion and want to share what they know with educators more widely. Importantly, they emphasized that this training should be held for all educators, general and special education.

4. **Professional Learning on Serving Students with Disabilities.** More generally, all educators in the workgroup emphasized that continued professional learning centered on inclusive practices and serving students with disabilities is greatly needed. Educators in the workgroup acknowledged the numerous pragmatic and ideological barriers that may prevent the co-teaching model being widely utilized. In lieu of a co-teaching model, they recommended strong training around inclusion and neurodiversity more generally, *"Everybody should be doing the same thing, right? Like it should be training for administrators, cabinet, like, the whole level down. Should understand the process and like neurodiversity as a whole, and how to support, like, the continued, ongoing training, those types of things"*.
5. **District Leader Support.** The final, but maybe most important condition for success of the co-teaching model and more widely strong practices around inclusion is the support of district leaders. Members of the workgroup discussed the extent to which decisions from district leaders have influence on the practices of educators and how that influence translates to practices around inclusion. Members of the workgroup were not shy to express their perceptions of the degree of influence district leaders have both on the operations of the school and the general school culture. When asked, educators in the workgroup expressed that they were unsure why co-teaching and other true inclusion practices were not very common. They did however point to district leaders as people who could influence change at their school sites to improve the experiences and resources of students with special needs. Some of the changes they proposed were things such as converting half-day classes to co-taught classes, approving professional learning around inclusive practices and stronger connections with district staff in the Special Education office. More than concrete changes however, educators in the group are looking to district leaders to lead a cultural shift. Educators in the workgroup emphasized the need for all educators to see students in early childhood education and students with special needs as "all of our students" rather than ECE or special needs students and feel that district leaders are best positioned to instill this mindset in school staff and families.

Continuous Growth

Members of the workgroup often discussed their continued professional learning and growth as important to their continued service to students and families. The "Innovators in Early Education" workgroup is a prime example of their continued professional learning. By all metrics, the workgroup members are highly-qualified and performing inclusive educators, however they all hold the belief that the work is never over. Despite their expertise, these educators are curious about ways they can improve practices around inclusion at a system-level, a practitioner-level and within themselves. This workgroup functions as a place to continuously evolve their practice, to learn from others and for the work that comes from the workgroup to be a positive voice for change. Importantly, the educators in the group also participate because it provides them an opportunity to be heard and for their voice to influence change, *"many of them are so positive and like, there for change, because I think they've seen it for so long, you know? And so just to have someone to listen and then, like,*

fight for what they're fighting for, but be a little bit bigger of a voice for them, I think that's helpful". Ultimately, the educators in the workgroup go because they are passionate about inclusion, serving students, improving the place where they are and they feel that their work is something that is continually evolving and improving year over year.

Conclusion

The educators at Mitchell and across the Santa Ana Unified School District who participated in this workgroup envision inclusive classrooms where all students feel seen, valued, and supported. Their definition of inclusion extends far beyond compliance or classroom ratios—it is rooted in everyday actions, relationships, and a deep belief in belonging for every child. Whether through embedded instruction, shared classroom practices, or thoughtful scaffolding, these educators strive to make inclusion a felt experience. Their stories illustrate that inclusion is not an outcome to be measured, but a culture to be cultivated—one that affirms each child's right to learn alongside their peers in meaningful ways.

While these educators view co-teaching as a particularly effective structure for achieving inclusive classrooms, they also recognize that no single model fits all settings. Ultimately, their goal is not to prescribe one approach but to continuously advance inclusive practices and elevate the role of early childhood education more broadly. Their mindset—grounded in reflection, learning, and ongoing improvement—is one they hope to model for others and embed in the culture of their schools and districts. They understand that inclusion can look different across contexts, but they are unified in their belief that high-quality early education must be prioritized in conversations about equity and access. For this group, co-teaching is not only a tool for classroom instruction—it is also a vehicle for advocacy, a way to demonstrate what is possible when educators work together with shared purpose. Through this model, they are communicating a broader message: all children deserve to belong, and all educators have a role to play in making that happen.