

Rationale/Basis of the Practice:

A proud and happy Special Day Class (SDC) student, Sammy, was called to the stage to receive his award. Students in the audience laughed and jeered at him, much to the horror of staff and parents. The embarrassment of that day became the catalyst for change at Rincon Middle School. Teachers and administrators began from that day forward to search for ways to create a new mind set at this school. We decided to create a new culture of full inclusion of all special education students. Little did we know that this would become the catalyst for change in the culture and climate of Rincon Middle School. This is still the concept we implement 12 years later, and because of it we have received many awards, including state and national recognition.

Although the catalyst began with the inclusion of special education students, we realized that the development of the whole child encompassed more than the characteristics that we emphasized; we needed to reclaim the idea that we are teaching the *child* rather than teaching content standards. At Rincon Middle School, teaching the child is teaching the **whole child**.

Keeping in mind that content standards play an important role in academic development, our goal became to create an environment that supports the development of all aspects of every child, including critical thinking, emotional, social, academic, physical, and civic responsibility. As John Goodlad states, "public education should educate the whole child and avoid rote teaching that may raise test scores but fail to produce healthy, fulfilled and participating citizens."

Tolerance is a universal term used to acknowledge the acceptance of others; however, the dictionary defines tolerance as "the act of putting up with something or somebody irritating or otherwise unpleasant." At one time Rincon Middle School accepted this dictionary definition of tolerance. However, we realized that this did not fit into our school philosophy and we became motivated to move beyond that definition of tolerance and create a school environment that develops the whole child, accepting them for who they are.

With the success of the special education full inclusion model, we developed specialized programs to support English Language Learners, academically and behaviorally at risk students, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. It is important to understand that we recognize these target populations, however we teach the *child* rather than the category that he or she represents. In teaching the child, we teach the whole child.

Description of the Practice:

When the idea was first considered to look at a specific population of students and address their needs, it was met with some reluctance because it was a "change" from what had been considered the norm. Through training and professional development, the staff became more receptive and involved in the inclusion process. The special education teachers became the leaders of this change as they explained the inclusion process and supported the general education teachers to become more confident in dealing with students with special needs. The special education team had created a unique environment for students with disabilities.

All special education students are now fully included in the general education population throughout most of the day. Some students with extremely low math or reading scores are

pulled for specialized instruction to support their needs. As the student progresses and scores increase, the opportunity is always there for the student to be more fully included in the general education classroom. In the general education classrooms, these students are supported by a special education teacher and support staff. The special team is there for the student's success, which is why Rincon's inclusion model is so successful.

Our campus also includes two very special classrooms: one that is devoted to medically fragile children and another classroom to support students with severe autism. Our medically fragile classroom includes one special education teacher with a full time LVN and two part-time aides that work with the five students who are currently enrolled. In the autistic classroom, there is one full time special education teacher with three full-time aides to support eight students. When appropriate, these students are mainstreamed into the regular education day. One can see them out at lunch, in exploratory classrooms like music or art, or in core classrooms. Regular education students can volunteer to support one of these special classrooms and many have found the job so incredibly rewarding that they request to continue their involvement year after year. These special education children are not only involved in the activities that take place in classrooms but also in team, grade-level, school wide, and off-campus activities such as assemblies, 6th Grade Greek Olympics, 7th Grade Renaissance Faire, 8th Grade Civil War Dance, and various team field trips.

In addition, we have a Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) program that involves two full-time interpreters who accompany the students throughout their regular education day. As the relationship between student and interpreter develops, the interpreters soon go beyond their job description; they transform into a friend, a confidante, and are frequently involved in their lives outside of school. Attending local high school football games or even a Padres game together is not unusual.

Through the development of the full-inclusion program, the staff recognized the need to develop the whole child, which goes beyond students with special needs. We cannot characterize the whole child model with one student when we have 1400 different students with 1400 different needs. We also realized that supporting the whole child includes not just a student's *needs* but their individual interests as well. These needs and interests can be supported and categorized into broad categories such as: academic skills, critical thinking, social skills, citizenship, and physical and emotional health.

Academic interests vary from child to child. As we strive to enrich our curriculum, we provide a variety of opportunities to enrich each student. For example, as 7th grade students are learning about the European Middle Ages in their Social Studies classes, all 7th grade classes are preparing for a culminating all-day activity at the end of the year. Students are transported back in time to an actual Renaissance Faire, complete with costumes, era-specific games and a professional jousting tournament. Some other opportunities include 8th grade Career Day, a day students can choose from numerous professionals who are invited to speak about their careers, and Portfolio Day, a time when students showcase projects that demonstrate their learning. Portfolio Day is a perfect example, as *Taking Center Stage – Act II* states, of students displaying the “many and varied approaches [used] to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.” Our commitment continues with the opportunity for students to become involved with Project Live, a program that promotes teaching students through technology, specifically video productions.

We are moving toward a true elective program where students are exposed to many different electives in 6th grade and have an opportunity to choose, or elect, their enrichment classes in 7th and 8th grade. These enrichment electives include ASB, Super Science, Multimedia Mentors, Student Aides, AVID, PLUS, Band, Chorus, and Natural Helpers. If an elective class does not support a student's interest, then they have the option to join an extra-curricular club such as Singing Club, Drama, Dance Team, or a sports team offered through our partnership with the Boys and Girls Club. A student can also participate in school-wide activities such as spirit days, dances or a variety of community service learning opportunities.

Rincon Middle School's desire to teach the whole child has expanded to a variety of social and emotional support systems. Peer leadership is encouraged through programs like: Natural Helpers, a hand-selected group of students that work through the counseling department as peer mediators; Rising Angels, a group of fifteen at-risk girls who are chosen by three teachers whose goal is to expose the girls to a successful future through community projects and college visits; and ASB, a successful class on campus that continually strives to include all students in social activities and community service projects.

To help students envision a better world, our school promotes and is involved in a Season of Nonviolence, which extends from January 30th, the assassination anniversary date of Mahatma Gandhi, to April 4th, the assassination anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King. Last year, the Gandhi Institute and the Association for Global New Thought, the co-sponsors of the Season for Nonviolence, added Cesar Chavez to the season, which has great meaning for our community with such a high Latino population. During the season, there is a number of ways students can get involved. Daily affirmations regarding nonviolent strategies are given and scheduled assemblies promote nonviolence. At the season's culmination, a district wide celebration is held and each school recognizes 6 students, 2 at each grade level. Last year, a 7th grade student named James Espinoza received the recognition award in front of district and community leaders such as the superintendent, mayor and chief of police. But among the crowd stood one woman whose pride outshone the rest, James's mother Avis. James was born with Spinabifida and has been in a wheelchair his whole life. As a result of many failed attempts of success in school, James had been home-schooled for over 6 years. Both James and Avis felt 7th grade was the right time to try again, hoping that Rincon Middle School was the supportive environment James needed. With the full-inclusion program at Rincon and a full-time nurse that accompanied James to each of his classes, James's first year in school was a great success. His team of teachers awarded him the Most Improved Student of the Year at the 7th grade Awards Ceremony. Not only did James thrive in a supported academic environment, he became a friend to many students because of his ready smile, great sense of humor, and positive outlook on life. He was nominated to become a part of Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS), a group of influential students that are trained to lead students through a variety of forums and activities that aim to build school community and break down social barriers. Now, as an 8th grader, James' academic abilities, coupled with his work as a PLUS leader, have earned him the respect of students and staff alike.

Academic success is always paramount at our school. We believe that every child can succeed with the right tools and opportunities. Since every student does not learn at the same pace, we have instituted a variety of safety nets. Our language arts classes are leveled to meet the different stages of our students' learning. Many teachers have Homework Helpers after school to assist students struggling with core curriculum. Our special education students are offered a Study Skills class every day to give them more time to work with core class

instruction. These classes are small in size to offer them more individualized attention on their assignments.

The staff is committed to a team-effort when working with the middle-school child. Each student is part of an inter-disciplinary grade-level team of teachers that meet on a weekly basis to discuss issues that include: student concerns, integrating academics, major upcoming projects, and feedback from counselors and administration on students. This continuous collaboration is critical and a major reason for our success.

We encourage student excellence of learning and have programs in place that reward their individual and team efforts. Our Academic Decathlon is a district-wide competition that is whole-heartedly supported by our district and is held at our City Hall. The competition is fierce, and we are happy to announce that Rincon has won 70% of these decathlons. Math Field Day, a competitive experience that focuses solely on mathematics, is an opportunity for our 6th grade students to contend with other students in our district. Eighth graders have the opportunity to compete in the Science Fair held at our school; finalists may move on to district, county, and state level. Many of our students are involved, and a number have made it to the county level. One of our students actually made it to state competition! A final example of our striving for excellence is the annual Spelling Bee that is held for all seventh and eighth graders. Again this starts at the school level, but a student can compete all the way to the national level.

From the moment students walk on campus in the morning, the expectation is that they interact with adults and peers in a positive, respectful manner. Teachers shake hands and greet their students with a “good morning” as they enter the classroom. As the staff promotes a positive greeting, students understand that the “lost art” of simple manners is very important at Rincon, and they rise to our expectations. This personal connection and adult modeling has led to an environment of respect and acceptance, more now than ever before.

We have provided opportunities and programs to increase the students’ sense of personal responsibility and truly understand the importance of being an active, contributing member of society. Led by student leaders, we participate in an annual holiday food drive benefiting Escondido’s Interfaith Council. We also participate in the Pennies for Pasta campaign, to benefit The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. In fact, one of the student leaders organizing this campaign is currently undergoing chemotherapy to treat his relapse of Leukemia. Being active in the community also includes “civic” duties, such as voting. This past year’s election buzz was evident here on campus as students studied propositions, debated candidate’s platforms, and joined in a school-wide election on November 4th, 2008.

Personal responsibility also includes being accountable for your own actions. All schools have discipline programs/policies/protocols at their site. At Rincon, we’ve implemented the Honor Level System (HLS) as a discipline and reward system. This system not only holds students accountable for making poor choices, but also rewards them for making good choices. Students are at various “levels” and are rewarded with privileges and activities for “doing the right thing” and staying at those top levels. In addition, our Alternative Learning Center (ALC) is more than just an In-School Suspension room. Our ALC teacher has transformed the A-L-C to now stand for **All of Life is Choice**. Rincon’s ALC has become yet another place of learning where students are provided strategies and techniques to make better choices in the future. The success of the program has yielded an over 82% non-return rate, which means the vast majority of students who receive ALC as a “consequence” do not return. As one would

imagine, our Rincon parents are very supportive of our new Honor Level System and have embraced our focus on developing the whole child.

Parents are sometimes the “forgotten” stakeholders in middle school. We’ve tried to change that at Rincon by providing opportunities for parents on campus, while realizing the needs and desires of the adolescent student. Our Parents’ Day at Lunch occurs on the first Friday of every month and welcomes parents on campus during their child’s lunch period. Parents are able to sit and eat with their child, meet their child’s friends, and participate in lunchtime activities coordinated by student leaders in ASB. This is the perfect opportunity for parents to network with each other and communicate with administration and staff. This also provides a very open, positive, and “family” climate which is amazing with a population of over 700 students at each of our two lunches.

Collaboration with parents is also evident on our School Site Council (SSC), Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), and English Learner Advisory Council (ELAC). These organizations give parents the opportunity to take leadership roles in developing the site plan, giving input on categorical spending, helping determine school focus goals, and advising the administration and staff on specific parent needs. These partnerships with parent groups are essential in closing the achievement gap, as described in The California P-16 Council’s report.

We recognized the need to educate parents, and have provided “The 7 Habits for Highly Effective Families” parent workshops, with curriculum developed by Sean Covey. Parents studied one habit a week for seven weeks, and the workshop culminated with families sharing testimonials and their newly developed family mission statement. As illustrated in Taking Center Stage Act II, parents and family members often need as much help as their children in facing the rigor, testing, and social changes that accompany adolescence and the middle grades. We’re confident that the success of the recent series of workshops will springboard to another series in the spring, and then continue in future school years.

Results of the Practice

How do we measure the success of our goal of “Developing the Whole Child program? We *feel* it as we walk around campus and have that sense of a positive and respectful school. We see it when we witness different student “cliques” problem solving and collaborating in the classroom. We *hear* it in the laughs of parents and students interacting together at lunch. We can *touch* it in the high-fives, hugs, and handshakes from students each and every day.

Improvement in behavior has also been measured in other ways. Our data charts 386 suspensions and 13 expulsions in 2004, compared to 294 suspensions and 2 expulsions last year. The most recent data from The California Healthy Kids Survey illustrates verbal harassment is at 10%, physical violence is at 7%, and harassment based on physical/mental disability is 2%. From a multi-purpose room of students making fun of Sammy not so long ago, to a cheering student body at a recent slide-show assembly, our school community has changed. Our students used to find many excuses to make fun of others that they didn’t accept. Now, one can attend an assembly that acknowledges the many faces of Rincon, from ASB to special education, from PLUS students to autistic and medically fragile population and hear cheers for every face on the slide show. Rincon teaches the **whole child**, and the results can be seen every day in every classroom.

