



Promising Practices

CHIME Institute in Harmony with Student Needs

The Challenge

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) requires all states to establish procedures to ensure that, “to the maximum extent appropriate,” students with disabilities are educated with students who are non-disabled in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible. Developing a full continuum of services for at-risk and special education populations in charter schools can be challenging. Many schools nationwide claim they offer a full continuum of services in their buildings. But do they? What does that mean in actuality?

In our continuing effort to profile best practices for charter schools, NCSECS reached out to the CHIME Institute in Los Angeles, California to explore an example of how their special education infrastructure has evolved to support and ensure that ALL students with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of their challenges, have equal access to quality programs in their school through a full continuum of services.



The Facts

The CHIME Institute (CHIME), established in 1990, is a national leader in the development and implementation of a unique model of inclusive education. At CHIME this means that children who reflect the demographics of the surrounding region – including children who develop typically, children with special needs, and children who are gifted – learn side-by-side.

Offering programs from Birth through the 8th grade, CHIME enrollment has increased from 70 students in 2001 to 740 students in 2015. Nestled in the west San Fernando Valley, CHIME’s broad appeal encompasses the rich dichotomy of Los Angeles. Drawing from 44 different zip codes, they have a 25% free and reduced lunch rate, 20% English Language Learners, and a current waiting list of just under 500 students. Their special education population runs steadily around 20% (15-20% of those students have moderate to severe disabilities – more than the state average of 3-5%. 10 of those have Down’s Syndrome). All student needs are met through a full continuum of services, interventions, and therapies based on the needs written into each student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

CHIME has become renowned as a national leader in the development and implementation of inclusive education. CHIME was the 2004 California Charter School of the Year and the 2013 California Department of Education G.O.A.L. (Grazer Outstanding Achievement in Learning) award winner. CHIME’s Director, Dr. Erin Studer, sat down recently with NCSECS to share insight into what has made their program valuable, and how they have become a national exemplary model others seek to replicate.



2013 Grazer Outstanding Achievement in Learning Award

The Strategy

CHIME administrators, community members, parents, and staff are all committed to taking evidence-based practices and putting them into play in the most dynamic way possible. This has meant altering systems and practices within the typical school setting to make it work. Many schools begin with a segregated system and then try to include students, which according to Studer, builds artificial barriers difficult to hurdle. CHIME pulls together all of the necessary resources – money, people, and materials – and puts them back into the general education setting so ALL students may benefit from expertise and resources typically limited to segregated classrooms. Below are strategies that have led to their continued success:

- **Co-teaching**

CHIME promotes co-teaching, but avoids the overutilization of two co-teaching methods. 1) one teaches and the other supports; 2) one teaches and the other works with small groups on the side. The trouble with these models is you have one teacher (typically the special education teacher) inevitably focusing on their caseload and this quickly leads to them becoming nothing more than a glorified (and expensive) set of hands in the classroom. According to Studer, “When you separate the teachers in the classroom, you are only one step away from creating a segregated classroom.” Co-teaching must be seen as two or more people sharing responsibility and this is implemented in a myriad of ways at CHIME.

- **Plan for Planning**

Planning must be done weeks in advance with administration making this a priority that is built into the work week. Studer insists his teachers employ more sophisticated planning, and he builds time for this activity into their regular work schedule. Planning does not happen in isolation, but rather in grade level or subject matter teams including special education teachers, making the teachers accountable to their teammates – not to administration – providing the most powerful accountability possible. Studer knows his staff are planning together by simply walking into classrooms and seeing that simultaneous teaching is occurring. CHIME also embraces a mandatory 20-minute debrief with teams at the end of each day. This keeps the classroom teams on track and collaborating, ensuring they all have avenues where they receive collegial support.



- **“Friend Raising”**

CHIME has enjoyed an ongoing partnership with the College of Education at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Studer recommends that each and every charter school reach out to, and partner with, a local community college or university. CSUN, Northridge uses CHIME as a teacher training site with 15-20 student teachers and 24 field-work students assigned there yearly. This provides a teacher hiring pipeline that keeps the need to employ from the outside (i.e., teachers with limited exposure to co-teaching) at a minimum. Studer recommends charter school leaders contact the coordinator of student placements at nearby colleges or universities to find general and/or special education personnel to create a strong pipeline that flows directly into the classroom. “Invite them to come out and visit your school” he says. “Do some friend raising.” Many institutions of higher learning are eager to explore the chance to help by finding paraprofessionals, student teachers, and volunteers to assist in the school. Be intentional in building these partnerships. “It takes as much work to sustain these relationships as it does to begin them, so be prepared to commit to this for the long term.”

- **Accommodations**

There are currently 140 students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) at CHIME. Teachers are responsible for the development of their own curriculum. Whether utilizing the Common Core, or purchasing their own curriculums, every team has created its own accommodations and modifications for its students. It is not uncommon to walk into a classroom where students are reading and studying a book like *Island of the Blue Dolphin* and see seven different versions of the book in use, laminated and bound by the teachers, and kept in a permanent module for use by anyone at the school. Studer admits that it is a lot of work on the front end, but, “if you are smart about it, keeping your work on the school server, laminating copies, etc., you have something to work with for a long time to come.”

- **Staffing**

Every classroom of 22-28 students has a general education teacher (which may be staffed by a CSUN intern) and every three to four classrooms share a special education teacher. They seek to hire special education teachers with a variety of certifications to accommodate all of the student needs represented. CHIME hires its own personnel, (teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals), when possible and only contracts with outside agencies for the less frequent therapies required. Whenever this staff has breaks in their schedules, they are expected to go into the classroom and assist in designing activities students will engage in throughout the week that is guided by, and embedded in, the curriculum. These same people will act as co-teachers and run centers in classrooms regularly.



- **Parents as Partners**

Parents are seen as the experts on their children and are excited to be an integral part of the planning for their education. All parents are invited in, made a part of the IEP team, taught the processes of writing a good IEP and collaboration, and then continue to work closely with the staff member assigned to be “in charge” of their child even after the IEP is complete.

- **Training**

Training is plentiful and front-loaded whenever possible to assure that anything a child might need is considered. From a school nurse, to CSUN staff, to parents themselves, training may be offered by anyone well-versed in an area of needed expertise.

- **Paraprofessionals**

Paraprofessionals provide support to meet the needs of the classrooms and are not assigned to students. Regardless of their assignment, they will never start and end the day in the same place or with the same group of target students. CHIME provides a robust training program for their paraprofessionals which includes peer support, authentic independence and a MISGO model of support (Move In, Squat, Get Out) helping paraprofessionals to remember to get in there, see what students need, and move on. There are four required modules paraprofessionals must attend over a two-year period that are taught by the special educators every Friday morning while the general education staff does yard supervision with the students.

- **Footing the Bill**

CHIME receives state and federal funding just like any other public school in California. They fundraise throughout the year and dollars raised go right back into programming for the students. CHIME raises (through both grants and fundraising) about 5-7% of its budget annually. The rest of its budget comes from traditional public school funding sources. Governing calculations of per pupil current spending data published in the U.S. Census Bureau Annual Survey of School Systems figures show that in Fiscal Year 2013, California spent \$9,220 per pupil.

The Expectations

CHIME has an advantage when it hires because everyone who interviews for a position there knows CHIME places a strong emphasis on special education service in the LRE, so there is less resistance to the inclusive philosophies of the school. You cannot and will not exist in a “silo” if you work at CHIME; you have to collaborate with other professionals. This is the disposition that is expected, and the attitude that new hires must embrace from the beginning – even those coming from the CSUN pipeline. CHIME utilizes its hiring autonomy, afforded by the California charter law, from the beginning and maintains the most rigorous hiring process possible. The above factors have all contributed to CHIME hiring and retaining quality people who match the needs of their program and already have buy-in regarding CHIME’s inclusive model. Or as Studer stated, “There is an inherent advantage in the fact that we are what we are.”



The Benefits

Studer exudes the confidence of a proud father when he shares, “CHIME is not the typical charter school model. We are really embracing the concept of a charter as an incubator for innovation.”

The work at CHIME has been taken to new heights as people from around the country and internationally are looking to CHIME to help in creating the best in inclusive programs in their own schools. CHIME has evolved from simply having visitors at their school, to providing a three day “Creating Inclusive Environments” training each fall, to building and maintaining inclusion networks and collaboratives nationwide. One such recent project was working with CSUN, Northridge to create an online Neurodevelopmental Teaching Certificate Program.



But most importantly, the inclusive model is benefitting students. CHIME regularly produces promising results in single measures like standardized testing when compared to the schools around them, even though they generally have 7-10% more students with special needs taking these exams. They often have double the percentage of students with special needs, including students with significant disabilities beyond a specific learning disability, who meet or exceed state standards on standardized tests as compared with other local district schools. Despite their commitment to serving a

diverse community of learners, CHIME’s state proficiency scores are consistently strong. Most recently, CHIME posted ELA and Math scores that were each 14 percentage points higher than the overall statewide average.

CHIME students are generally over-prepared academically as they move on to high school and alumni report they are ready to meet any high school challenge. However, for some students with special needs, it can be a struggle to move into a segregated setting when they complete the program at CHIME. Sadly, the students with moderate to severe needs more often than not are placed into segregated programs and special day classes once they leave CHIME. The good news for them is that all CHIME families and students are empowered by their experiences at CHIME and know how to go to their new schools and self-advocate, demanding what they believe is the best Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for their children – in a positive way.



Takeaways

- Nearly all students with disabilities can be included in general education classrooms with appropriate supports by trained personnel.
- Effective inclusive practices are always evolving and must be continuously monitored and refined. All schools that strive to be inclusive – including CHIME – must constantly examine their practices and seek to do better for the students they are serving that year and then be prepared to do the same examination again when it is time to serve next years’ group of students.
- Schools that are serious about undertaking this work need to look closely at systems and structures that may present road blocks. For example, CHIME knows co-teaching is very important to its inclusive model. A school may want to adopt this approach, but if you have 20 general education teachers and only one special education teacher, it will be systematically impossible to establish an effective co-teaching model. “Sometimes we focus so much on getting individuals information they need to do certain practices but we don’t actually create the systems or conditions that allow them to truly implement what they have learned,” reports Studer.
- Quality inclusive programs start with the right mindset. That mindset needs to infuse and guide nearly every decision that is made at the school. If we truly believe that all children have a right to access the general education classroom with their grade-level peers, then the rest of our choices – from how we plan lessons, to what software we buy, to how many teachers we hire, to how we schedule our school day – must all be guided by that mindset.

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Related Resources:

CHIME 2015 CAASPP Test Results

CHIME Creating Inclusive Environments PD Workshops

CHIME Neurodevelopmental Strength-based Approach to Teaching and Learning

Related Publications:

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