

Using Technology to Connect Students with Emotional Disabilities to General Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case follows a high-school special-education teacher who teaches in a program for students with emotional disturbance (ED) in a large, comprehensive high school. Many of her students cannot attend general-education classes because of anxiety or behavioral issues, but as a special educator, she does not have the subject-area expertise to provide them with the academic education they need to be prepared for life after high school. She hopes that through the use of a video connection to general-education classes her students can be exposed to the highly qualified content-area teachers while remaining in the safe environment of the ED classroom. She believes that virtual attendance in a class could help her students feel comfortable enough to make the move to the actual classroom and be included with their peers to gain academic knowledge and social skills.

Keywords: Academic Support, Education, Emotional Disturbance, Social Science, Special Education

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Marirose High School (MHS) is one of five large, comprehensive high schools in a school district that serves only high-school students. The district boundaries cover several suburban areas that surround a large city in southern California. Although each high school has its own unique demographic makeup, the boundaries for enrollment are broad enough that each draws upon varied socio-economic strata. There is also a continuation high school in the district for students who prefer a non-traditional educational environment.

Established in 1964, MHS currently serves approximately 1,500 students in the ninth through twelfth grades. There are 80 teachers in the school, resulting in a student-teacher ratio slightly higher than the state average. The majority of the students are White (55%), with Hispanic students making up the second highest ethnic group (25%), and 8% of the students are English Language Learners. Although the school's boundaries include some of the more affluent suburban towns in the area, 11% of the students are eligible for free lunch, and another 2% are eligible for reduced lunch. Of the 150 students who receive special-education services, 10 spend the

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majority of their day in classes taught by special-education teachers, and another 11 are in the Emotional Disturbance (ED) program. Nearly all (96%) of the teachers hold a full credential, and they have taught an average of 11 years. The special-education department consists of four resource teachers, a special-day class teacher, an ED teacher, a school psychologist, and six instructional assistants, two of whom work exclusively with the ED program. There is also an outside therapist who works with the ED program on an 80% contract.

The school faculty takes great pride in its academic rigor, and the school has received several awards for excellence, including the 1997 California Distinguished School award and the 1998 National Blue Ribbon School. All students have the option of receiving additional support from their teachers in the form of a morning tutorial time when each teacher has his or her door open to help their students on a walk-in basis. In addition, the teachers provide an after-school homework center that is housed in the library. The teachers are very active in their students' lives, coaching extra-curricular activities, chaperoning dances, and attending sporting events and plays. There are many activities for students, including sports, dances, plays, and clubs like the Gay/Straight Alliance, Color Talk, and Courageous Conversations. The Future Farmers of America group is very active, in part due to the state-of-the-art agriculture program housed in the school's farm. Students taking classes in the agriculture program grow vegetables, raise animals, and learn about the science and business of agriculture.

Classes at MHS are provided in blocks: each class is offered in a 95-minute block every other day, with the exception of a daily, 50-minute period early in the morning. With the exception of the science classes, classrooms are not grouped by subject, but randomly distributed. For example, one wing houses a math class, two history classes, a resource room, and two English classes. The school does not have an indoor cafeteria, with the exception of a small row of tables outside the lunch line where students purchase food. When it rains, students congregate under the covered walkways to eat their lunches.

Many technological advances have been implemented at MHS. Each classroom has recently been equipped with a ceiling-mounted projector that is connected to the teacher's computer. The classrooms all have television sets, from which the student-led morning bulletin is viewed each morning. The special-education classrooms have at least six computers each, with headphones and microphones. The teachers are all strongly encouraged to use the district's on-line grading program and the communication site that has a calendar feature for posting homework. All students and parents have their own access to each of these sites, and nearly all of the teachers post both homework and grades. The library is equipped with a computer lab, which is available for students' use during morning tutorial, between classes (including during lunch), and after school as the homework center. Many teachers use presentation software and interactive programs in their instruction.

This is Nancy Bennett's second year of teaching at MHS and her first year teaching in the ED program. Last year she taught ninth-12th grade history in the resource program, and she taught a sixth-grade self-contained class the year before in a nearby K-12 district. She holds an internship credential in special education, which allows her to teach while completing the coursework toward her full credential. She does not have a credential in a subject area. Her bachelor's degree was in psychology, and she had only volunteer experience in a classroom prior to beginning the teaching program. In addition to her teaching and other special-education responsibilities, including assessing her students, writing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and organizing and facilitating IEP meetings, Nancy also coaches the girls' softball team at MHS.

Nancy is the third teacher in the ED program in three years. She hopes to bring stability to the students' lives, as well as academic rigor. Many of her students cannot function in a general-education classroom and spend the majority of their day in the ED room where they receive group

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