

Cache Owens:

Welcome to the Inclusive School Spotlight podcast series brought to you by the Educating All Learners Alliance and the Center for Learner Equity. The Inclusive School Spotlight series highlight schools that are using innovative and promising practices to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities. I'm your host Cache Owens. And today, we highlight Fairmont Elementary School in Sanger, California. Fairmont Elementary serves about 700 students in grades TK through eight, 5% of whom are students with disabilities. Today, I am joined by principal Jared Savage to talk about Fairmont's college and career partnerships and student learning communities. Jared, thank you so much for joining us today.

Jared Savage:

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Cache Owens:

We are excited to learn all about Fairmont. We know that Fairmont's model is based on three guiding principles, connection, capacity building, and coherence. Can you just tell us a bit about how each of these principles play out in the day-to-day in the school building?

Jared Savage:

Sure. Once again, thank you for having me. Our three big guiding principles, we call them our three cultural principles, are made up of connection, capacity, and coherence. Typically in education when we think of capacity building or even coherence for that matter, it's sometimes limited to the adults in the building, to the teachers and leaders and to district office folks from very much a systems view. What we really strive to do here at Fairmont and in Sanger Unified is really make sure that we're bringing students into the fold. So through our three principles, connection, capacity and coherence, we feel like this gives us a fighting chance to really enhance our learning culture, to make sure that kids are included into those systems where they have voice, where they have agency, where they're really contributors to the system. So connection, for starters, I think typically connection is viewed as something that when we think of being connected to the system, we typically refer to we're physically connected.

Jared Savage:

We show up in the same place, we teach in the same at the same school. Connection for us is something greater. It's actually about how does everybody, every person, individual, how are they connected to something greater than themselves? So here at Fairmont, we call it a culture of one. We want to make sure that kids and adults not only feel connected personally, but they also feel connected psychologically, emotionally, personally where they're invested to something greater. That something greater is obviously dependent on the vision of the school and the district. But that's really important to us. When it comes to capacity, capacity again is typically referred to sort of deemed toward teachers and leaders. It's more in the form of a professional development day that teachers are expected to build capacity and then go implement in their classroom. Capacity for us is more along the lines of how are we building the capacity of everyone in the system, including our kids.

Jared Savage:

So when it comes to capacity building, not only is it what are the standards that the students are learning, but it's truly about how are they learning them? So capacity building for us is sort of twofold. One, how do we make kids feel significant in the learning culture? And two, are we preparing them with tools to actually be contributors to others? We think that's a valuable component to that. And then lastly, coherence, I think in educational systems, coherence is sort of typically defined as having a deep understanding of the principles within it. We like to refer to coherence here as mobilized. So mobilized coherence for us is what do the actions look like, sound like? Do the actions actually back up what words are on paper and the philosophy of the school. So we'd like to talk about mobilized coherence in that we focus on our everyday actions within the system. So those are our three guiding principles. We've had a lot of success in impacting all students on campus, especially those students with disabilities, our English learners. It impacts all students within a multi-tier system of support.

Cache Owens:

Awesome. I love to hear about this culture of one and thinking of everything for the greater good. Can you talk a bit about how those three guiding principles really make Fairmont a great place to learn for all students, especially those students with disabilities?

Jared Savage:

Yeah, I think where those come together in sort of this culture of one where connection, capacity and coherence come together, in the center where those sort of converge, we actually call that the nexus. So the nexus of a culture of one actually has to do and through our experience and through our research, it really comes down to core identity. So when we think about adults on a campus, teachers and leaders and students, how do they identify themselves individually and how does the collective system identify itself? So we really pride ourselves in core identity, core purpose. We feel like that gives every single kid regardless of skillset or academic background or socioeconomic situations, we feel like core identity gives everybody sort of this anchor, this place where it's a level playing field for everyone in the system to be viable contributors. So really feel like that impacts everywhere within the sort of the four corners of the system.

Cache Owens:

Sure. Sure. That makes a lot of sense. And I know one of the sort of beacons at Fairmont is the many college and career focus programs and industry partnerships that are available. Can you talk a bit about these programs and how students with disabilities have access to and benefit from these as well? Maybe you have a favorite success story that you can share. I'm eager to hear about these programs.

Jared Savage:

Sure. We've done a lot of work in this area throughout probably the last four or five years. And so we're really proud of how we've evolved as a system. Old system thinking was we are limited to our schedules and offerings, limited obviously by the people and the skill sets within it. What we've become in the last four or five years has really been transformative. What we have now is we have 30 plus offerings, a third of which are fully aligned to CTE at our high school. So we have engineering pathways. We are in the process of really locking in our ag pathway. We have a digital media pathway for students that has just been phenomenal. I have many, many stories. I think there's a couple that come to mind that I can share sort of a short version of, but there's been countless stories over the last five or six years.

Jared Savage:

And I have to tell you, that's one of the things that I am most proud of. I've been the principal here for 12 years. And what I'm most proud of is when kids get a chance to experience learning differently and then you see them change, have different motivation and be inspired by different things and build the confidence to go on and do amazing things after they leave eighth grade here. And I've been here long enough to where I've seen them actually go through high school, go through college, and now they're actually part of the workforce. And that's super powerful. So there's a couple key examples for me. One is our students with disabilities, we have created a learning environment here where they not only feel safe and secure. They feel like they can make a difference. They feel confident enough to engage in learning opportunities, whether that's coding on a computer, whether that's using our 3D fabrication lab to build things, whether that's hands-on in our ag laboratory or participating in stock market games, which you have a finance lab where kids actually invest in the stock market.

Jared Savage:

They're being exposed to these real world things where relevancy, I mean, educators throw around relevancy like nobody's business but it's sort of haphazardly done. And relevancy is really about how we engage kids every single day. So there's two examples. The first example, we had a female student who was an English learner, had some disabilities. This was six years ago. We started our Femineer program, which was to engage female students on campus as engineers.

Jared Savage:

So we offered this class up. It was a standing room only for some of the classes. So we had to open more classes to engage all the female students who were interested. That little nugget for her as a junior high in my opinion changed the trajectory of her life. She left here, won different awards, went on to high school, did a phenomenal job going through the engineering pathway at the high school, went on through college. Now she's actually going on to be an engineer. That's just one example of seeing it sort of from start to finish, but it's really about giving kids the experience that's needed, coaching them up, building their confidence, and then just finding that opportunity to build that grit and perseverance that when they leave here, they're going to be prepared to go on and do amazing things.

Jared Savage:

I think that's one example for her. Just fantastic kid, fantastic story. Shining example. Another example is we had a student also, let's see, had some different challenges in school, had some disciplinary issues. We got that young man teamed up and they competed in a competition for a prosthetic arm locally. Went on, won the region. Went up to Google and competed in a state of California competition and ended up winning second place at Google. And this is a student who had a rough go, was not your shining straight A student, went up there and competed at Google, did an amazing job and took second place in the state. So those two really stand out for me as transformative for those kids. And I'm so proud of the fact that we were able to help unlock or unleash some of those talents and skills and dispositions within those kids. I think it's two poignant stories that really connect the whole system.

Cache Owens:

Right. Yeah. It really just highlights the magic that can come from just exposing students to a wide variety of things. And you never know what may spark their interests and lead them down a whole new path. Thank you so much for sharing those stories.

Jared Savage:

Those offerings are not limited to students. All kids, especially in sixth through eighth grade have access to those regardless of grades, regardless of test scores. It's really important to us to have this sort of robust, comprehensive offerings for kids because we feel like it is our part of our core responsibility to inspire kids, to motivate them. And the only way we're going to find have kids find that inspiration is if we engage them. So beyond the classrooms, we have these different offerings and the alignment has just been phenomenal. It creates that legitimacy within the system. And we are preparing kids here at Fairmont to go on and impact the high school basically from the bottom up. So the system changes that we're seeing is the high school has actually made some adaptations and adjustments to increase their capacity based on what we've been doing here. So we're really, really proud of that.

Cache Owens:

Congratulations. That's such a huge achievement to see your actions start to trickle out into the community around you.

Jared Savage:

A couple more things on that is one of the things that we've been highlighting in the last four years is we've been in the progress of creating an ag engineering technology complex here right next door to our campus. And the ultimate goal of that is to serve as a facility, a hub for the 8,000 plus students in Sanger Unified where kids are going to be able to access agriculture technology engineering with hands on experiences here at that complex. And we are actually breaking ground in the fall. And I think that really speaks to the enormous work that's been done behind the scenes, both logistically, philosophically, financially. To actually get that off the ground, we really feel like it's going to be a blueprint for other districts to follow. It's going to have a huge impact on the entire system moving forward.

Cache Owens:

Right. And that sounds like no easy feat. So again, congratulations.

Jared Savage:

Thank you.

Cache Owens:

So talking about this community that you're building there, this multi-part system, I know one part of that system is the student learning communities that are also central to Fairmont's model. How did these come to take shape at Fairmont? And if you could talk about what makes them a particularly valuable practice for students with disabilities or any other diverse background?

Jared Savage:

Sure. Well, the student learning communities is not new for us. About 15 years ago when I first started in Sanger Unified, I went down to a professional learning community training down south in California and spent two days there in a training with thousands of educators. And the whole emphasis obviously was on teachers and leaders, working in teams, focused on data, making sure that all students succeed and progress and learn and achieve at high levels. And I remember at the end of that conference, I remember thinking, man, all these are great systems. These are really, really impactful. Is anyone going to tell the

kids about all these great things that we're doing behind the scenes that were trying to impact them on a daily basis? And so in my mind, as a high school football coach and track coach I see the world through a coaching lens.

Jared Savage:

And so from that point on, I really took it upon myself to start developing this philosophy, this concept around student learning communities where kids would have that voice and agency that we really are pushing for. And we've evolved over the last 10 years and we've seen some fantastic results. So let me just break down what student learning communities are. There's essentially what we call four functional tenants, sort of the beliefs, these pieces that make up student learning communities. The first are student teaming structures and processes. So we actually have teams all the way down to four and five year olds here on campus. These teams have roles and responsibilities. They set academic and learning goals and they do data analysis, which is fantastic. It's a wonderful thing to see. And then we have built in rewards and recognition for this for all of our kids built into the system that is ongoing every single day.

Jared Savage:

And the primary focus for rewards and recognition isn't necessarily a trophy or a medal. It's actually we focus on the integrity of good work and being a good collaborator, a good communicator, those types of things. So that's one of the functional tenants. The other functional tenant of the four is student-centered enabling conditions. So oftentimes as educators, we take for granted the fact that we as the adults have the power to create the conditions necessary for kids to succeed.

Cache Owens:

That's a really great point.

Jared Savage:

Yeah. We just take for granted, right? We show up and we go about our business. We do the best we can. But man, really creating those conditions is something that's really, really powerful. So within that functional tenant of enabling conditions, there's hey, how are we creating powerful learning experiences for kids? How are teachers taking on this what we call a coaching stance where they have built in challenge, but they're also building the confidence of these kids? So anyway, that's sort of the functional tenant of enabling conditions. The third one actually is student-led learning where when you think about it, the most successful healthy organizations have shared leadership opportunities for the adults. It's literally shared leadership. It's not top down approach. It's not principle making all the decisions. Let's bring people into the fold, let's build their capacity and man, let them share in the leadership. There's power to that. So student-led learning is really this concept of how do kids have shared leadership opportunities for voice and agency within the system. Let's put together some processes, some practices in place where kids get an opportunity to do that.

Jared Savage:

And then the last of the functional tenants, we call this sort of the core functional tenant of student learning communities. It's actually collective student efficacy and myself and Matt Navo of CCEE done a lot of work in Sanger and our time working together. But collective student efficacy is such a big deal. It's oftentimes referred to for adults. But truly what it comes down to is we call it the core functional tenant

because we believe that efficacy is the driver that moves all these other pieces. So efficacy is typically referred to as sort of this collective belief and confidence in sort of this conjoint capability of a team to go out and organize and execute a game plan to create change. I mean, that's the juice in efficacy and we feel like why does that have to be limited to adults? If we're able to be great teachers and leaders and we're able to facilitate these conditions to create more efficacy enhanced learning environments, we really feel like that's a very, very powerful thing. And it's definitely paid dividends for our entire learning community.

Cache Owens:

Right. Right. I really hear this reoccurring theme of thinking of not adults and students and children, but really what do people thrive with? What conditions do people thrive with? And I think that really hopefully empowers students to feel like they're full people and not just looked at as children who maybe have different needs.

Jared Savage:

Absolutely. Mm-hmm.

Cache Owens:

So I hear so many exciting practices happening at Fairmont and I'm sure there's other folks out there listening, other school leaders who may want to implement something like a student learning community or who might want to leverage industry partnerships for college and career. What does it take to do so in a way that's authentically inclusive? What would your advice be?

Jared Savage:

No, great question. I think in all those categories, I would just described whether it's the CTE or the cultural principles or the student learning communities, it's really about taking on this philosophy of we want kids to powerfully engage the learning environment and experience learning differently. So for leaders that are out there, if they were to simply ask, hey, how do our kids experience learning on this campus? What's our philosophical view of student voice and agency in the classroom? What does it actually look like? Because I really think that as educators, we sometimes get stuck in the systems and routines and schedules that are traditional. And there's power and there's leverage to that. The danger is if we are simply living and dying by the current schedules, there may not be an opportunity to grow and change and transform the system to do what's best for kids.

Jared Savage:

And so by possibly rethinking and having a paradigm shift to asking those questions directly to kids about how they experience learning, do they have a voice? Do they have agency on the student learning community side? That might get that going on the industry partner side, with that simple question of how do kids experience learning, if it is sort of this sit and get model where kids are just showing up on time, sitting at a desk and getting information all day long, that's probably not the best practice that we could provide with all the knowledge and experience that we have as adults. So outreach, simple phone calls to industry partners whether it's business leaders, small business owners, farmers, engineers. The truth is there's people outside of the education world that are dying to contribute. They know how important education is and they are dying to contribute.

Jared Savage:

Maybe they don't call the school or call the district, knocking on everybody's door. But there is so many resources that are truly viable that make our communities thrive that are literally a phone call away to do some outreach. I mean, we do co-teaching opportunities, mentors, job shadowing as an elementary school, TK through eighth grade. We have business partners and industry partners that come to our school and co-teach with our teachers so that the standards that kids are learning so that they come to life, right. We do outreach where we drive the business to industry partners so that we can actually experience what they do in sort of a hands-on space all tied back to the standards that our kids are supposed to learn. So all that being said, if we ask ourselves, how do kids experience learning? How do teachers and leaders experience learning at a school site or a within a school district that might be the trigger, the question that's needed for change?

Cache Owens:

Right. The clue. So many important lessons there. Thank you so much. And thank you for joining us today, Jared. I know that there is so much to be gleaned from your insights and we're just fortunate to be able to pick your brain a little bit.

Jared Savage:

Thank you so much.

Cache Owens:

And thank you all out there for listening to the Inclusive School Spotlight series. This podcast is brought to you by the Educating All Learners Alliance and the Center for Learner Equity. For more resources and practical approaches that educators can use to enhance opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities, check out the Educating All Learners Alliance resource library by visiting [EducatingAllLearners.org](https://EducatingAllLearners.org) and clicking the resources tab. To learn more about the work of the Center for Learner Equity, check out [CenterForLearnerEquity.org](https://CenterForLearnerEquity.org). Thank you. And please be sure to check out the other episodes in this series.