

Supporting Innovative Practices



Mission

SIP's mission is to provide unparalleled statewide technical assistance to educational communities in their pursuit of inclusive and equitable systems. Together we seek to empower each student to be purposeful and reflective, resourceful and authentic and strategic and action-directed within an environment of belonging, community and connection.

Background

Funded by the California Department of Education (CDE) Special Education Division, Supporting Innovative Practices (SIP) is a collaborative project of the Riverside County Office of Education, the El Dorado County Office

of Education and partner organizations. SIP provides technical assistance to Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) - schools, school districts, county offices of education (COEs), and Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA) - focused on building inclusive and equitable systems that support all students, including students with disabilities. Working through the California Statewide System of Support and funded by the California legislature, SIP is a systems change organization that offers tiered support across the state, including:

Tier 1 - open access to resources to any school community throughout the state

Tier 2 - on-going support to over 100 grantees recommended by CDE

(continued on following page)

Tier 3 - direct technical assistance for LEAs identified by CDE for Intensive Compliance and Improvement Monitoring (CIM)

Within this tiered support, SIP works to transform and align systems by offering a variety of individualized and group professional learning opportunities as well as online resources. (Please visit [SIP's website](#) for more detail.) This profile focuses on the strategies and practices for coherence that emerge from individualized technical assistance and Inclusion Academies in three school districts and one SELPA.

Interviews

This profile is based on interviews with:

Jolie Critchfield, Director of Child Development, Marysville Joint Union School District

Kacy Grimes, School Psychologist, Marysville Joint Union School District

Lauren Heusser, School Psychologist, Marysville Joint Union School District

Carmen Hopkins, Riverside County Office of Education

Michelle Jilly, Program Specialist II, Poway Unified School District

Patty Metheny, East Valley SELPA

Alaina Morris, Behavior Analyst, Marysville Joint Union School District

Kevin Schaefer, El Dorado County Office of Education

Marla Silversmith, Superintendent, Burlingame School District

Wakita Wilson, Coordinator of Special Education, Marysville Joint Union School District

Strategies for Coherence

While there are issues of coherence across the California education system, support for students with disabilities has been particularly disjointed and uncoordinated. This incoherence shows up between SELPAs and the COEs, in the Differentiated Assistance (DA) process for students with disabilities, and in the implementation of statewide initiatives - like Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) - that rarely take into account the needs and assets of students with disabilities. SIP addresses this challenge by facilitating intentional processes that help LEAs align and bridge initiatives - MTSS, ELO-P, Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAP), and Compliance and Improvement Monitoring - for more coherent, inclusive and equitable systems.

This profile focuses on four strategies that support coherence:



Capacity Building

- (1) Starting with mindsets
- (2) Providing flexible, meet-you-where-you-are support
- (3) Connecting districts with resources, organizations and initiatives



Collaborative Structures

- (4) Getting the right people to the table for impactful collaboration

As with all of SIP's work, these strategies are not limited to supports for students with disabilities. They are strategies that any process hoping to impact the way people and institutions work together could use. In this section, we provide a brief description of SIP's approach followed by examples of how each strategy manifests in the work with specific LEAs.



1. Starting with mindsets

This looks like...

- Grounding work in the Results Pyramid: changing results by first changing experiences and beliefs
- Encouraging participants to see students as whole people, not only as people with disabilities
- Helping staff see that inclusive learning environments benefit all students

SIP grounds much of its work in the Results Pyramid - in order to change results, people's experiences and beliefs need to change first. SIP activities encourage participants to think of students as their whole selves with all the dimensions of identity, not only as people with disabilities. Broadening perspectives in this way helps participants see that learning environments that allow for inclusion are best for all students.



The Results Pyramid, Culture Partners

Perspectives from the field:

- The **Marysville Joint Union School District (MJUSD)** Child Development Department started working with SIP in 2021 to increase inclusion practices in their preschool program. SIP encouraged staff to think beyond “labels” and “placements” to planning for the supports that all students need. This broader view has helped staff see that any student can struggle and require tiers of support whether they have a disability or not. The mantras “all students are gen ed students first” and “special ed is a service, not a place” have been helpful. This mindset shift was supported by professional development that empowered staff to know that they have the skills to teach all students.
- Before working with SIP, **Poway Unified School District (PUSD)** had disparate teams across SPED and general education with overlapping tasks and very limited connection between the teams. SIP brought the teams together to coordinate around the district's vision, mission and goals and calibrate their cultural beliefs around inclusion. PUSD then began facilitating monthly meetings that included updates for each other as well as peer consultations around problems of practice.

These consultations gave teams practice in collaboration and a deeper understanding of each other's expertise and resources. Where team members had been running around to cover emergencies, they now have a system of referrals across teams with a clear set of roles and lines of decision-making.

- The **East Valley SELPA** supports special education in five districts in San Bernardino County, California. In the spring of 2024, the SELPA worked with SIP to launch a bi-annual Summit to bring district teams together to plan for greater inclusion of students who qualify for special education supports and services. The fall 2024 Summit started powerfully with a presentation by SEEDS Scholars, undergraduate students with disabilities from the University of California, Davis. Their testimonials about their experiences and dreams challenged people's assumptions and tapped into their deeper motivation for inclusion. After each Summit, SIP continues to work with individual districts and their schools, helping them define and embed their own core beliefs into their school visions. With this approach, inclusion is integrated into the core work of the school and becomes part of the district and school messaging to parents and the broader community.

2. Providing flexible, meet-you-where-you-are support

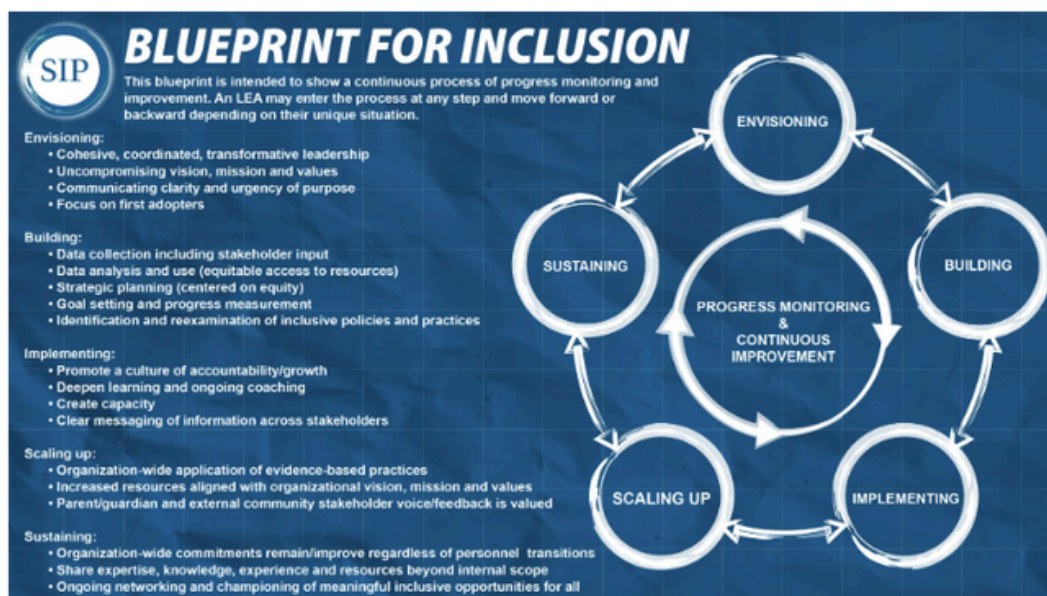
This looks like...

- Using the [Blueprint for Inclusion](#) as a shared improvement and implementation framework
- Offering individualized technical assistance grounded in each LEA's specific needs
- Using the Inclusion Academy structure with flexibility for each team's unique context

Rather than one-size-fits-all technical assistance, SIP facilitates learning opportunities and improvement processes that are grounded in the specific needs of its participants. SIP grantees describe how SIP entered the work in the area they had requested help - preschool inclusion, for example - and then expanded its scope as additional needs became apparent. This approach keeps the work focused on relevant issues and responsive to emerging opportunities.

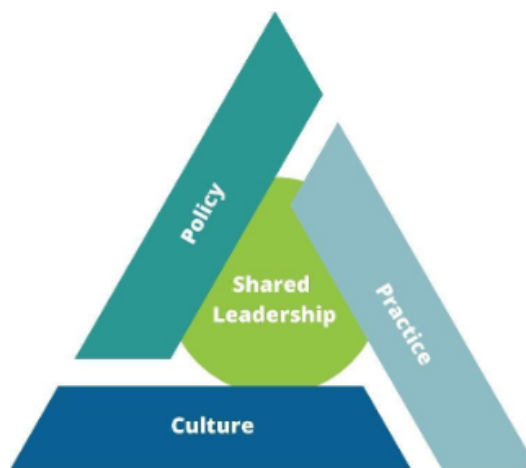
At the heart of SIP's approach is the [Blueprint for Inclusion](#) (see following page), an implementation and improvement framework distilled from knowledge in seminal change management literature in the fields of both education and business. SIP encourages its grantees to follow the stages of the Blueprint in order to increase the likelihood of achieving sustainable and scalable models that support diverse and equitable learning environments. An aligned [organizational inclusion self-assessment](#)

helps schools and districts determine areas of strength, implementation gaps, and next steps for improvement and scaling. The SIP team believes that following the systematic approach of the Blueprint builds schools' and districts' capacity for improvement in other initiatives.



Blueprint for Inclusion, SIP

As an example of flexibility within structure, the Inclusion Academy “... provides the time, conditions, and resources for teams to engage in deep reflection, planning, and goal setting aligned to district wide strategic plans (LCAP, CIM)... and aimed at the realization of environments rooted in belonging, relationship, and community for all students.” The Academy creates a structure, adapted from Booth and Ainscow Index for Inclusion, with three sessions focused on Inclusive Culture, Inclusive Policy and Data, and Inclusive Practice. Within this structure, participating teams start with their experiences and beliefs, explore their existing systems, identify opportunities for change and build an implementation plan based on their unique context.



Adapted from
Booth and Ainscow's "Index for Inclusion"

Perspectives from the field:

- The **Burlingame School District (BSD)** has been working with SIP over multiple years. Coherence work fits easily within the district's philosophy of serving the whole child. Superintendent Marla Silversmith repeats their mantra: "Each and every student with at least one year's growth academically, behaviorally and socially-emotionally." SIP's work in BSD started in the middle schools with training for all staff on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and a shared focus on how all students were being supported towards college and career readiness. With the successful middle school work, BSD expanded to a districtwide SIP Inclusion Academy with teams from every school.

When BSD started working with SIP, the SPED program was disjointed. Mild/moderate special day classes, for example, were at different schools for different age groups so students were experiencing the disruption of switching school sites. Through the SIP process, BSD has closed all of its mild/moderate special day classes and integrated students into general education classes with Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports. While there are still Extensive Support Needs (ESN) classes, students in those classes are also assigned a general education classroom and teacher as their home base. With this strategy, every teacher knows all their students which allows students with disabilities to participate in activities like field trips that might have been out of reach before.

SIP's varied and flexible supports have profoundly impacted the way the district integrates its initiatives to support all students. Behavior specialists and counselors work with students receiving special education supports and services and those in general education with the philosophy that "a student shouldn't have to have labels to get support." Multiple funding streams - Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P), Title 2, foundation funding, bond funding - are blended to meet prioritized needs and to ensure that resources are distributed equitably across all schools in the district.

- **Poway USD's** monthly sessions with SIP have transitioned to ongoing collaboration with general education through the MTSS team. Two MTSS Teachers on Special Assignment (ToSAs) are actively working with SPED teams to support collaborative initiatives. SPED and general education staff frequently co-facilitate training and are consistently connecting the training content to other initiatives that participants are working on. These intentional efforts at coherence are helping participants to make sense of and adopt the content more readily. When a new math curriculum was being adopted, SPED staff were brought to the table to design the SPED rollout. It is now rare for planning meetings to happen without representation from both SPED and general education. With increased collaboration, people are able to leverage each other's expertise - for example in UDL - and recognize that strategies that work for students with disabilities are applicable to all teachers and students.

3. Connecting districts with resources, organizations and initiatives

This looks like...

- Offering Inclusion Academies in partnership with SELPAs, COEs, System Improvement Leads (SILs), and Open Access
- Bringing in Statewide System of Support technical assistance providers in the Academy's final session
- Hosting Demonstration Site visits to spark conversation and build peer networks

SIP is rarely working on its own. The Inclusion Academy, for example, is often offered in partnership with the local SELPA, COEs, System Improvement Leads (SILs) and Open Access. In the third and final session of the Academy, SIP brings in six to nine technical assistance providers from the Statewide System of Support. Participating teams learn about the options for support and choose which ones to work with based on their implementation plans. This approach ensures that participating teams are linked with their SELPAs and COEs and also connected to the Statewide System of Support for ongoing work.

SIP also hosts visits to Demonstration Sites where grantees can learn from schools that model one aspect of their inclusion work. Rather than showcasing perfection, SIP invites grantees to Demonstration Sites to spark conversation about work in progress and generate new thinking. Demonstration Sites recognize that the opportunity to showcase their work serves to advance their practice as they prepare for the visits and gather peer input. The Demonstration Sites also build a network for ongoing peer support across SIP grantees.

Perspectives from the field:

- In **Marysville JUSD**, SIP connected the team to other organizations and initiatives to continue their improvement journey. They visited schools in different parts of the state to learn from their work and are now hosting their own Demonstration Site visits.
- **Poway USD** has two Demonstration Sites, one at the middle school and one at the high school. PUSD appreciates that SIP finds areas in which it can be a leader while also finding areas for growth and connecting them to resources and opportunities for continued learning.



4. Getting the right people to the table for impactful collaboration

This looks like...

- Including superintendents, SPED and general education staff, union representatives, community partners, and families
- Involving those most resistant to change, not just the willing
- Including operations staff so everyone understands how their actions impact students' learning environments

SIP helps its grantees build teams that are both grounded in the realities of the work and able to make decisions. Inclusion Academy teams, for example, include superintendents, SPED and general education directors and teachers, credentialed and classified union representatives, community partners and families. This mix of participants is essential for creating change that makes sense in practice, is accepted by those who are doing implementation, and can move forward through the decision-making hierarchy.

Perspectives from the field:

- In **Burlingame School District's** districtwide Inclusion Academy, the teams include mandatory participation by the school site administrator and strategically involve the teachers who were most resistant to change. A district team that includes operations staff - facilities, nutrition, and finance - also participates in the Inclusion Academy so that everyone understands how their actions impact students' learning environments.
- The **East Valley SELPA** learned from early efforts how important it was to make sure the right people were involved, including union representatives and general education teachers. For the Summit, district teams require participation of the superintendent, credentialed and classified union presidents, SPED and general education teachers and parents.

Challenges

LEAs noted that coherence is particularly challenging for SPED because the needs of students with disabilities are not considered in the planning and implementation of education initiatives at the state or local level. Districts also noted the overwhelming number of plans required by the state, many with the same goals. Districts struggle to prioritize among initiatives, trying to choose the strategies and practices that align with their vision and mission. A 2026 report from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), “Advancing Inclusive Education in California Schools: Lessons from the Supporting Innovative Practices Project,” affirms this challenge by highlighting the lack of coherence across the Statewide System of Support:

“Data from SIP indicate that cross-role and cross-agency collaboration is a foundational condition for inclusive education. State policy could support this work further by formalizing shared planning structures, common improvement tools, and joint accountability across [Statewide System of Support] partners - including COEs, SELPAs, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE), and the CDE. Clarifying roles, aligning technical assistance, and establishing shared expectations for inclusive practice within differentiated assistance and CIM supports would potentially reduce fragmentation and ensure that inclusive education is embedded within broader efforts to improve schools rather than treated as a separate initiative.”¹

Within the context of these challenges, SIP has been consistently successful in promoting collaboration and shifting LEAs towards more cohesive practice. Its approach offers valuable lessons for the state’s efforts to improve alignment that would benefit all educators and students.

Impacts

The PACE report describes SIP’s impact on its grantees:

“The evidence shows that districts participating in SIP - especially those with initial low inclusion rates - made substantially faster progress increasing the time children with disabilities spent in general education settings compared to state and national trends. Applied professional learning produced statistically significant gains in educator knowledge and early adoption of inclusive practices.”²

PACE researchers specifically found that SIP’s professional learning shifts educators’ beliefs, builds their knowledge and practice, and results in improvements in inclusive placements. Across the evaluation, PACE found that SIP districts experienced consistent improvements in Least Restrictive Environment indicators, reductions in restrictive placements, and shifts in educator beliefs.

¹ Advancing Inclusive Education in California Schools: Lessons from the Supporting Innovative Practices Project, PACE, 2026, p. 14

² *Ibid*, p. 1