Imagine a middle school with 450 students in grades 6–8 (20% special education/40% poverty/40% minority) in which special education students spend more than 90% of their day in classes with their regular education peers. Teaching teams composed of regular education and special education teachers collectively plan and deliver instruction to a common group of students. Student “labels” are ignored; support is provided according to individual student needs; and a common high-quality, standards-based curriculum is offered to all students. Although O’Keeffe Middle School is not there yet, it is getting close.

O’Keeffe’s journey began five years ago. At the time, O’Keeffe’s special education students were mostly placed in separate classes and taught by special education teachers—typical of most special education program across the district. This service-delivery model was based on the belief that special education students’ unique learning needs could best be addressed in “pull-out” arrangements, but there was little evidence that these classes were providing high-quality, challenging curricula. Many special education teachers were professionally ill-prepared to teach a standards-based curriculum. There were a disproportionate number of minority students in the special education program, significant student behavior problems among special education students, minimal interaction among regular education and special education teachers, and a feeling of disconnectedness from school for many special education students.

Making improvements in the special education program required direct principal leadership and central office support. The yearlong change process was marked by conversations within existing school curriculum, grade level, and special education meeting structures. Staff members examined the values and beliefs guiding the programming and analyzed data related to student achievement and student behavior. We found that special education teachers felt devalued, uncomfortable working with students outside of their specialized training areas, “ungrounded” in subject content, and disconnected and isolated from other teachers. Regular education teachers were concerned about their lack of training in teaching special education students, that special education students would cause them to water down the curriculum, and that special education students’ behavior would disrupt the learning of other students.

To address those concerns, we held many discussions, teachers visited sites where special education students were more fully included, and staff members attended conferences related to the education of special education students. “These are all of our kids” and “We are collectively responsible for their learning” became the underlying values for the change. Although some staff members were skeptical and a few transferred to other schools, no overt opposition surfaced related to
the proposed change: creating inclusive classrooms where regular education and special education teaching teams taught collaboratively.

Parent response to programming changes was mixed; some parents were concerned that their children would not receive the specialized instruction needed to address their learning or behavioral needs. When the new service-delivery model had been in place for two to three years, parent support grew stronger because parents liked that their children were part of mainstream school life. Parents also appreciated that students who were formerly in pull-out classes were no longer stigmatized and that the student body was less fragmented. They also were pleased with the quality of differentiated instruction in mainstream classes. Many parents noticed that all of their child’s teachers were taking responsibility for the student’s learning.

I decided that the student class-scheduling process would be based on a framework in which all special education students would be assigned to academic class teams that included two regular education teachers, one special education teacher, and a full-time special education assistant. This framework has been refined over the past four years, but the basic design and value orientation remains the same. The teams each represent a demographic cross-section of the school, and special education students with various disabilities are included in each team. Each team has approximately 50 students, and teachers are collectively charged with teaching four core-academic subjects to all students, greater access to high-quality curricula cotaught by regular education and special education teachers. Students also feel more connected to the school and have higher self-esteem. According to district data, O’Keeffe students show improved standardized test scores, and according to data collected by the school, there are fewer behavioral referrals and suspensions. Regular education students benefit from being in classes with a heterogeneous mix of students, have more staff members available in academic classes to assist them, effectively experience reduced class size because of a more favorable staff-to-student ratio, and have not shown a decline in standardized test scores. Further, extended support for all students in the regular education classroom has reduced the special education student referral rate.

Teachers benefit by having common planning time; enhanced collegiality; more opportunities to coteach classes and capitalize on their skills and interests; elevated status as special education teachers; and shared responsibility for teaching tasks related to grading, lesson planning, parent conferencing, and student behavior management.

This effort continues to evolve and to be fine-tuned. To sustain this program, staff members must buy into the values and operational framework of the model. Some teachers, uncomfortable with the model, have transferred to other schools employing different service-delivery systems. Conversely, when positions open at O’Keeffe, many teachers elect to transfer into our school because of their personal or professional beliefs regarding this model. When interviewing potential new employees, the hiring committee clearly states the expectations for teachers at O’Keeffe. When contractual teachers are evaluated, we review their experience in carrying out this program.

This model has led to better-quality instruction for all students, greater equity, access to a more challenging curriculum for special education students, better use of finite school resources, greater teacher differentiation of instruction to make learning accessible for all students, and a reduction in the number of students referred to and placed in special education. The service-delivery model currently in place at O’Keeffe is now being promoted throughout the school district.

Because all staff members share a common set of values and beliefs and collectively embrace the task of educating all students, our school is a better place for everyone. PL