Lessons from Inclusive Inquiry



Our *Connections Briefs* highlight the collaborative efforts of Santa Clara teachers and Stanford researchers in our Research Practice *Learning* Partnership (RP*L*P). This innovative collaboration fosters mutual learning through the exchange of expertise and co-designed projects that advance inclusive learning ecosystems responsive to the diverse needs of all students.

We are deeply grateful to the many teachers, students, and staff at Agnew Elementary who contributed to this project. We especially thank the following teachers, Ryan Chappell, Sandy Gozalvez, and Whitney Uyeda; and the researchers from the Stanford Learning Differences Initiative, Lindsey Hasak, Nicole Henderson, and Elizabeth Kozleski, for their direct involvement in authoring this brief.

About Us: Abram Agnew Elementary School

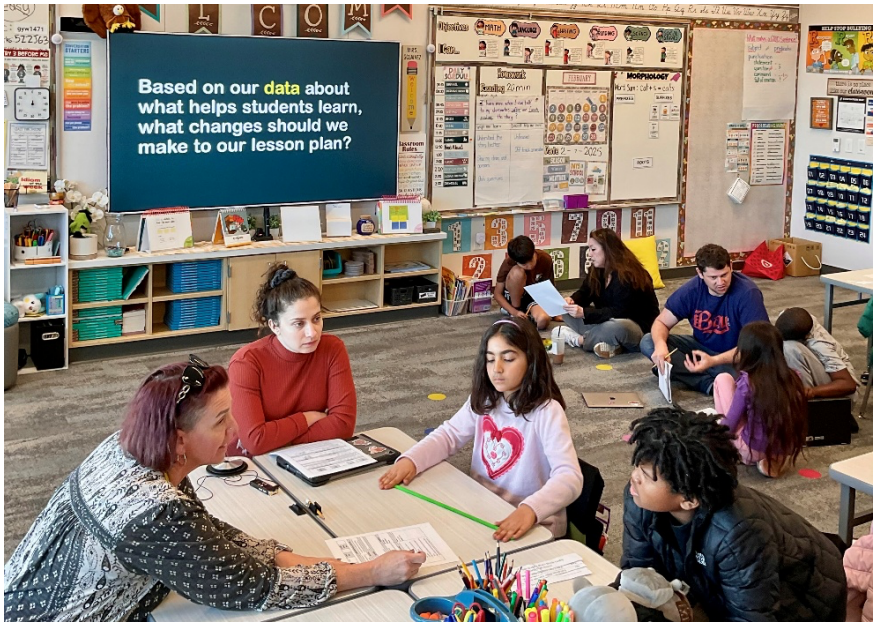
Agnew Elementary is a growing, inclusive community rooted in connection and possibility. Opened in 2021 on the grounds of the former Agnews Developmental Center, which served children and adults with developmental disabilities. In its place, three new Santa Clara Unified School District (SCUSD) public schools thrive: Agnew Elementary, Huerta Middle, and MacDonald High School. Agnew centers students' learning and well-being in every way for its 504 TK–5 students learning across 23 classrooms.

At Agnew, educators and school leaders lean into learning designs that meet the needs of all learners. Nearly half of our students are multilingual, and about 10% receive special education services. The school faculty and leadership work closely with the middle and high school on the Agnews campus to support students throughout their inclusive education journey with Santa Clara Unified.

Listening to Learn: The Inclusive Inquiry Story

In the winter of 2025, something transformative took place at Agnew Elementary. Our RP*L*P collaborative grew from a need for clearer structures and stronger support for inclusive education. This story emerged from the efforts of three dedicated educators working alongside members from the RP*L*P team. We wondered: "What would happen if students and teachers co-designed lessons together, with inclusion at the core?" With this question in mind, we[1] embraced the challenge.

Three educators, each with our own teaching style and classroom culture, were united by our shared curiosity. We wanted to explore what learning could look like when students became researchers and partners in co-designing lessons that met the needs of every learner. We had only the seed of an idea about what we were getting into, but we knew we needed time to plan, reflect, and align our vision for what we hoped to accomplish. We also knew we had to collect data to understand if what we were doing was truly making a difference for all of our students.



[1] When we is used, we mean educators, students, and the RP*L* P partners.

Over the course of seven meetings, we unpacked what inclusivity really meant in our classrooms. We raised questions that challenged our assumptions and pushed our thinking forward. We were curious about what makes students eager to learn:

What content excites them? What choices and opportunities do they wish they had? We were excited to make space for these questions and to consider where we might create opportunities to reach every learner.

We each invited two of our own third and fourth grade students to join us on this journey. We intentionally identified students who could be viewed as "hard to reach." "Hard to Reach" isn't a diagnosis. The term recognizes that our learning systems sometimes don't account for students with complex learning, social, or linguistic needs. We wanted space for these students to build confidence, voice, and leadership. How could our learning environments truly value their perspectives and strengths?

Our student researchers participated in five small group sessions. They learned how to observe their classmates closely. Observing closely sparked their capacities to distinguish between learners who were participating and those who might be left out in class learning.

Our inquiry team began by redesigning a read-aloud lesson. We used survey data collected from every student in our classrooms to make thoughtful shifts in the lesson design based on students' preferences and needs. The survey data included open-ended responses like, *"I learn more when we have class discussions because when I hear the thoughts of my peers, I get new ideas."*

Before we taught the first lesson, we reviewed the plan with our student researchers. They suggested more time for reflection and offered helpful language to support all learners. In response, we restructured prompts to build in space for thinking and discussion. Grounded in students' feedback, the lesson plan was ready. It was time to teach.

The first time we taught the lesson, things went well. The teacher began by reading aloud a short, illustrated story about kindness. In the story, a student seems to be isolated. As the story progresses, small acts of kindness support the student's participation and engagement with learning and his classmates. The story conveys that all students matter and experience belonging when they are recognized.

The student researchers both participated in the lesson and collected observations about their peers. Student researchers used simple drawings and reflections to capture their observations. As the teacher read the story, one of the two teachers observing the lesson noticed that 18 out of 24 students shared their responses to the story and received feedback that pushed their thinking further about what it means to include and support others.

After the lesson, we debriefed as a whole team. The student researchers identified what stood out in the lesson, helping teachers see the lesson through their eyes. One student said, *"I like when [the teacher] was asking a lot of questions, and people were sharing their thinking."* Another noticed, *"I heard no one talking except the teacher, unless the teacher asked questions and we raised our hands."* These insights pushed us to rethink. We needed to create more entry points for students to process and express their thinking.

In the second lesson design, we became more inclusive with our learning approach. The second educator taught a new iteration of the lesson. This next iteration gave students more time to think together. Individual whiteboards helped students jot down ideas to support and increase peer-to-peer talk. The teacher modeled using sentence frames like "I read, and I thought..." on large chart paper. The sentence frames



helped students to express their ideas using turn-and-talk moments to voice their understanding. Following the turn-and-talk, the students joined small group discussions. Instead of a set of questions, the second lesson provided a prompt asking students to identify their "ah-ha moments" in the story. The sentence frames paired with the ah-ha questions seemed to create a more student-centered experience.

With two lessons under our belts, we reflected on the balance between student talk and teacher-led instruction and how students processed the lesson. The students told us they liked the small group discussions. One student shared, *"I think it's pretty helpful. You share your ideas so [others] also understand what you mean. It's like the 'a-ha' moment actually helps them understand and identify with the story."* That shift in how students were understanding the lesson propelled us to be more curious about what might happen if we asked connection-focused questions before reading—questions that invite students to link the story to their own lives.

By the third iteration of the lesson, centering every student's voice became more intentional and visible. This time, small group discussions took place before listening to the kindness story. By inviting students to reflect on how they felt and what mattered to them, they were primed to listen to the story's message. We moved beyond delivering the content. Instead, we invited students to co-create meaning and strengthen their connection both to the lesson and each other.

After teaching the three versions of the lessons, we reflected together on the inquiry process. Our students offered honest and insightful feedback about their learning experiences. By observing and collecting data on all three lessons, the students were able to identify who was and wasn't included in learning. Every single lesson changed because the students gave us perspective on who was learning and how they were learning, and that helped us to make these adjustments.

Through lesson repetitions and shifts, watching each other teach helped us see our practice as evolution. We got better as we worked together. We learned through curiosity. Sharing the lesson design process with students deepened our perspectives personally and professionally. Learning with students fostered inclusive practices. Inclusive inquiry is more than a structure; it's a way of being in community with our students who carry knowledge we might overlook.

Beyond the Lesson: What We Took with Us

We saw our students and ourselves differently. Inclusive Inquiry shifted how we understood our responsibility—not only to deliver content, but also to co-create learning experiences that center students' voices. **Our students explained what helped them learn. They described what it felt like when their ideas shaped the classroom. Their feedback transformed our teaching, reminding us what it's like to be seen and what it means to teach and learn together.**

Co-creating three lessons with our students built an inclusive space. It became the foundation that allowed every student to participate. We imagine cycles like this continuing throughout the year, with more teacher trios, a rotation of student researchers, and multiple lesson topics across content. With each cycle, we expand learning communities where inclusivity is a daily practice.



Doing the Work: Inclusive Inquiry in Action

An "Inclusive Inquiry" cycle begins with students in partnership with their teachers. Imagine three teachers you want to work with and the students you bring in the process. Helping students understand and look at learning in their own classroom is key to your success in sharpening your own skills as a designer of learning for all your

students. Inclusive Inquiry focuses on collaborative design. You, your colleagues, and your students become genuine collaborators in designing a single lesson that gets transformed each time you teach it. **Here's how you do it.**

Plan (6, 75-minute meetings)

Form a three-teacher team.
Meet with your building leader to make sure you have the resources needed to complete the inquiry cycle (substitute coverage for 1 day, 2 teachers).
Invite 2-3 students from each educator's class to join the process.
Plan, organize, and facilitate the student research orientation. (See Guide)
Identify a lesson to use for the research lesson.
Co-design the lesson with your student researchers.
Together, critique your lesson plan, ensuring that it addresses every learner's needs.
Organize Substitute coverage for 2 teachers during each Teach and Reflect stage.

Teach

Teacher 1 uses the co-designed lesson with their class.
The inquiry team (3 teachers plus student researchers) observes student engagement throughout the lesson.
Student researchers gather peer feedback after the lesson with simple surveys or brief conversations.

TIP: Keep notes about changes you make and why—they'll help you reflect during the final "summarize" step.

Reflect, Refine, and Teach

The inquiry team reflects on the degree to which the lesson engaged all learners and achieved the outcomes.
Refine the lesson plan based on observation and feedback.
Teacher 2 teaches the revised lesson.

TIP: Give yourself time between teaching each lesson to listen, revise, and reflect with your student researchers and team, and make changes that lead to stronger learning for all students.

Summarize: Repeat, Reflect, Refine, and Teach

Discuss how the data demonstrates an impact on student engagement.
Reflect on what you learned about making lessons more inclusive.
Pinpoint strategies that increased student engagement and inclusion.
Summarize key learnings to guide future teaching and inclusive inquiry cycles.

What are the benefits?

- Expands and tunes teachers' universal designs for learning (UDL)
- Empowers every student's learning successes
- Increases student engagement
- Facilitates collaborative teaching
- Builds joyful relationships between teachers and students
- Centers student voice in designing learning
- Shifts capacity to deliver inclusive education

What is the commitment?

10 sessions over about 3 months.

- Exact meeting dates and times will be dependent on team preference.
- Some meetings will happen during the school day to include your student researchers.
- Working with your site admin to organize logistics for sub coverage during the inquiry cycle.

A Great Resource from our Colleagues at the University of Southampton

https://reachingthehardtoreach.eu/guide/