

Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports

Putting it all together

Cedar Rapids students advance with multi-pronged approach

It's one thing for a gifted teacher to make the difference in the lives of her students. It's quite another for an entire school district to do it. Let alone a big one.

But the Cedar Rapids Community School District has taken on an aggressive and comprehensive approach to ensure each and every student receives the best education possible.

"It is not one teacher doing things right – it is an entire system," said Sheila Lehman, special services executive director for the Cedar Rapids district.

To boil down just what Cedar Rapids is doing into a sentence or two wouldn't do it justice. It's a veritable mix of Response to Intervention, formative assessment, accountability, collaboration and evidence-based instruction.

Though the initiative is still in its early stages, educators love what they are seeing: Growth among students on IEPs is impressive, with top elementary schools in the district experiencing 80 percent or more of students on IEPs making more than a year's growth in a year's time.

But while it may seem like Cedar Rapids is taking a buckshot approach, make no mistake: The educators are laser-like focused.

"We are accelerating our instruction," Sheila said. "We no longer think that one year's growth is acceptable. That's because our students have an achievement gap – they may be one to three years apart from their peers; if we continued to make one-year growth, they would never catch up with their peers."

The district's initiative started several years ago when officials worked to streamline policies and goals to ensure the schools were all going in the same direction. Moreover, they ensured they would stay on course and not be distracted by changing directions midstream. To that end, the district has:

- Hired six instructional coaches for the district; all are highly trained. The coaches are out in the schools supporting teachers and focusing on what each individual student needs.
- Developed a very specialized curriculum that is evidence based, and ensure all teachers are thoroughly trained.
- Retained an unwavering focus on Professional Learning Communities, or PLC, in which teachers must learn together and work together.

"The focus on PLCs means that working together they become better individually," Sheila said. "That's what is really helping all kids – when the teachers help each other."

In the past, special education teachers tended to work in isolation. The PLCs eliminate that.

"We bring them together to talk about how to get things done" through the PLCs, Sheila said. "Teachers learn from one another and, ultimately, everyone improves."

The instructional coaches were put in place in the current school year. Their work – and that of the teachers – centers around four questions:

- What is it that we want kids to know and be able to do (derived from the Iowa Common Core)?
- How do we know that they know?
- What are we going to do if they don't know it?
- What will we do if they do know it?

Staff is held accountable for ensuring these questions receive correct answers.

Instructional coach Priscilla Polehna says the district's commitment is strong.

"They encourage us to learn it, go out and practice it, and come back and reflect upon it before we tweak it," she said. "The district sees value in practice."

Priscilla, who works with six different schools, says each school's needs are different, just as each student's needs are different. But each school receives support.

"We provide support to the teachers and get teachers to look deeper into the data and find proper resources," she said.

That data, she said, holds the keys to success for all students.

"We are focusing a lot more on monitoring and whether students are making progress," said Julie Grotewold, who is with the Grant Wood AEA and works closely within the Cedar Rapids initiative.

"It is just not acceptable for a student to go through a year with minimal progress. It is ongoing intentional planning and actions in order to achieve the results we want to get."

The direction and mindset is catching on throughout the district. And the students are benefitting.

"We're committed to all kids," Sheila said.

"Every teacher in every building has ownership of all kids."

Question and Answer with Sheila Lehman

1. What does your district do to foster "ownership" of students with disabilities among ALL staff?

We foster ownership through by ensuring special education teachers are members of grade-level Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at the elementary level and with content area PLCs at the high school level. The achievement of students with IEPs is a natural part of that conversation about the achievement of all students. Ownership of all students is also enhanced by our efforts toward inclusion, co-teaching, and collaboration.

2. Your goal is for students receiving special education to achieve more than a year in one year. How do you know this can be done? How do you convince teachers this can be done?

I know this can be done because our high incidence special education students do not have intellectual disabilities. They can achieve to high levels when our expectations for them are high and when we accurately determine the necessary accommodations and modifications needed. These students need to receive core academic instruction plus a little more. When we can think outside the box and arrange our schedules to make this happen, the achievement follows. I don't have to "convince" teachers that we can

accelerate our students' achievement because where "core plus more" is being implemented the achievement data speaks for itself.

3. How are students who receive special education participating in interventions through RtI (or other multi-tiered system of support)?

Special education teachers have been using formative assessment methods and RtI for a long time. It's a natural part of the progress monitoring of a student's IEP goal. Students receive specially designed instruction (intervention), then progress (response) is monitored weekly or bi-weekly and then adjustments to instruction are made accordingly.

In addition, nearly all our schools have an intervention block which is part of our efforts to respond to What will we do if they don't learn or already know it? This is a time when based on formative assessment data students are grouped for remedial or enrichment opportunities. Our special education students are included in the same manner as general education students.

4. How are best practices shared and strengthened?

Sharing best practices is the action research part of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Teams of teachers plan together to implement strategies or interventions, then from reviewing the student data, they can determine the most effective methods. This is the heart of a PLC – collaborating and learning together to improve instruction and student achievement.

5. How is data used to inform instruction?

A Focus on Results (data) is the third big idea of a PLC. When PLC teams meet, all teachers (including special education teachers) bring their common formative assessment data to share. A review of this data helps identify the next instructional steps.

In addition to this, special education teachers also closely monitor the progress of their students' specific goals on their IEPs. Data is plotted on a graph and if the trend line is not moving as expected, adjustments to instruction are considered.

6. How is professional development determined?

Buildings assess where they are on the PLC journey that I've described above and can choose from the many resources the district and our AEA provide to help them with their next step.

7. Does the district have a comprehensive system of Learning Supports in place to help remove any barriers to learning that our students may face?

Yes. This is another example of the systems and processes we have in place that are aligned with our overall efforts to improve student learning. We have:

- A district-developed social-emotional curriculum that is considered core instruction in grades K-8;
- The vast majority of our schools are Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) schools;
- District-developed professional development in teaching social skills (core) and responding to social-emotional behavioral needs for Tier II-III;
- Staff are trained in bullying and harassment prevention. Students also receive instruction on the harmful effects of bullying;
- With guidance from the district, buildings have created pyramids of interventions (Tier II-III) for reading, math, and behavior. We have a systematic process for identifying students in need of these supports;
- We have a systematic focus on attendance through a program called "Everybody Every Day!";
- Our counselors are currently receiving guidance and PD from the National Center for Transforming School Counseling with a focus on how they can focus their work on student achievement and removing barriers to learning; and
- We have developed our own district-wide learning supports database that tracks all students who are at risk and/or receiving interventions. This is web-based and available to all buildings as students move or transition to another level.

Principal knows in's and out's

To say that Hiawatha principal Eric Christenson has had some success in a school-wide effort would be an understatement. In fact, Eric, as principal of the now-closed Polk Elementary School in Cedar Rapids, had the most proficient students on IEPs in the entire state. Combining math and reading scores, Polk's students on IEPs were well over 70 percent proficient.

Now at Hiawatha Elementary, Eric expects the same.

What kind of collaboration do you have between special education and general education teachers?

We expect progress in both the general education and special education programs. We are working on the collaborative model where special education teachers are co-teaching in the classroom rather than kids being pulled out. All of the special education teachers are on grade-level Professional Learning Communities. Another big nugget is the importance of collaboration with our Grant Wood AEA people. We're constantly looking at our data, and must be willing to change direction if necessary.

How often do you monitor data?

We try to take a data point weekly to biweekly, depending on the student.

What if a child is a year or more behind?

The level 1 teachers and general education teachers have the ability to scaffold their instruction. If they are working with a fourth grader with a third grade reading level, they would scaffold level to third grade in order to get to grade level. In other words, they are not paying attention to the grade or age, but rather the level of skill to ensure the child can build upon his or her skills. It's targeted instruction.

What about parental involvement?

We work closely with the parents – particularly with the kids with behavior problems. We see so much greater results in a shorter time. It's a trust issue with the parents, getting the parents more vested in the child's education; they eventually start talking about the importance of school with their child. We get parents involved through home visits. With parental involvement, you are getting them to understand where their child is and where we need to get them.

High-energy class leads to high levels of learning

Walking into this fourth-grade math class for students with IEPs, one thing is particularly striking: The energy level is palpable. The eight students are engaged in math as much as they would be in a foot race. The enthusiasm among all is clearly present.

Co-teachers Holly Reeder and Sara McBride work in tandem. Today, Holly is leading the class, while Sara sits with two students who require one-on-one coaching.

The students are learning fractions – fourth-grade level, thank you very much.

"If I had a pizza and took one-fourth or two-eighths of it, how much would I have?" Holly asks. "That's right, I would have the same amount."

Thumbs pointing up, the students agree.

It's this high-level delivery by the teachers that keep the students on their toes for the hour-plus class.

Even a student who has behavior disorders – indeed, he had a meltdown in a class the day before – is not a problem in Holly and Sara's classroom.

The questions now are getting tougher, and the students balk a bit. Holly won't have it.

"You can do this – you are fourth graders," she says, emphasizing it with great pride. "By the end of this unit, you will say to me, 'Oh, please, Mrs. Reeder.'"

The students' enthusiasm doesn't wane when the class ends. In fact, the majority forego recess – their choice – to come back to practice their math.

A quick recap for you

In choreography, the moves to a dance are taught in segments. It's not until you finally string all those segments together that you see how the dance is supposed to really look.

So it goes with best practices in a classroom, too.

In the last six months, Each and Every Child has gone through many of the dance segments, but hasn't put it altogether. Until now.

In a quick recap, we have touched upon:

- Differentiated instruction
- Explicit instruction
- Systematic instruction
- Student response and feedback
- Formative assessment
- Educator teamwork/collaboration
- Intensifying instruction
- Response to Intervention

Here are the definitions of each:

Differentiated instruction (evidence-based): Differentiated instruction simply means altering a teaching experience to maximize the understanding of the whole realm of learners. Differentiated instruction revolves around three key components: explicit instruction, systematic instruction, and opportunities for student response and feedback.

Explicit instruction: Explicit instruction means overtly teaching the steps or processes needed to understand a construct, apply a strategy, and/or complete a task. Explicit instruction includes teacher presentation of new material, teacher modeling, and step-by-step instruction ("I do, we do, you do") to demonstrate what is expected so that students can accomplish a learning task.

Systematic instruction: Additional modeling with clearer and more detailed explanations; more concrete learning opportunities with the use of pictures, graphics, or think-alouds;

Tasks broken down into smaller steps; Instruction broken down into simpler segments;
Step-by-step strategies; and/or Temporary support gradually reduced over time.

Student response and feedback: Students with learning difficulties need frequent opportunities to respond and practice with teacher feedback throughout lessons to accelerate learning. Frequent student response can assist the teacher in monitoring student understanding, and teacher feedback during student practice can be a powerful tool for refining and mastering new skills.

Formative assessment. Formative assessment is the proactive opposite of summative assessment; that is, instead of measuring what a child has learned, you examine how to best improve how the student learns. Formative decisions involve how to differentiate or intensify instruction and what to focus on when teaching.

Educator teamwork/collaboration. Formalized collaboration ensures that all educators share their best practices, offer advice, interpret data together.

Intensifying instruction. One can increase the frequency of intervention; one can increase the length of the instructional sessions.

Response to Intervention.

The critical components of RTI include:

- Robust, universal instruction in the Iowa Core;
- Universal screening (where all students are screened);
- Evidence-based, instructional interventions at the Targeted and Intensive levels;
- Progress monitoring; and
- Data-based decision-making