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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

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Conflict resolution

It was about the last thing Linda Biermann wanted to do: raise conflict. Sometimes it is easier to live by the adage: "Go along to get along."

But Linda, who lives amid the rolling hills near northeast Iowa's Tripoli (pronounced Trip-Oh-La), knew her problem wasn't going to go away unless she intervened. Her son Michael, who has Down syndrome, was entering middle school. And she wasn't seeing eye to eye about her son's future with school employees. Educators believed that Michael would best be served in a primarily special education environment.

"When Michael was in elementary, he enjoyed a lot of inclusion, and we hoped to continue it in middle school," she said. "When middle school started, though, there was apprehension among teachers about how Michael could access the curriculum and how it was going to work. There was general fear. They never had a student with Down syndrome – this was all new ground, but (husband) Lowell and I felt passionate that for Michael to be successful in his life, he had to learn among his peers. We felt he could access the curriculum with some modifications."

So Linda and Lowell forged on, despite their misgivings.

"Conflict is difficult, especially in a small town," she said. "It is hard when you feel like you're creating a conflict, but we felt it was appropriate for Michael. At one meeting, it was obvious there were reservations."

Teacher Karen Neuendorf said the conflict, in part, was institutional.

"The way our education system has evolved is that when you have a special needs student, as a teacher you are led to believe that it is up to the special education teacher to do it, rather than the general education teachers," she said. "As a classroom teacher, we subconsciously give that responsibility to the special education."

But the misunderstanding also can be exacerbated by special education teachers, too.

"We have great special education teachers here, they want the success so much, but they become territorial toward their students," Karen said.

When both parties reached an impasse, they turned to facilitated resolution, where a disinterested third party sat in to have both sides air their misgivings.

"The resolution process is very difficult, but fruitful," Linda said. "We could come up with solutions, opportunity for teachers and administrators to say things without interruption."

"It was through that process that I could see what the fears were, and I could understand what teachers really needed was support. From that, we could come up with ways to get that support. It was not that teachers didn't want Michael in the classroom, they just needed support."

Superintendent Troy Heller says that key to success in such disagreements is the unbridled participation of

parents and students. Conflict, he said, should not be avoided if done respectfully.

"In my 25 years in education, invariably we have had the greatest successes when the parents and students actively participate," he said. "Every situation is different, and it takes everyone from administrator to teacher to parent to determine what is best for each child."

It's important to focus on the fact that disagreement is not based in malice, he said.

"Districts intend to do the best in each situation," Troy said. "It is a philosophy that has to go back to pre-service schools (schools of education) where we stress that these are all our kids – from preschool through 12th grade. You may have to go through more steps, but it is still the general education teacher's responsibility to teach math or English or whatever topic."

And that's important, regardless of what subject you teach, said math teacher Beth Mugan.

"A lot of times I would do the instruction, and then it would be time where the special education students would get up and go to the special education teachers to work on problems," she said. "I never got the one-on-one with them. When I can get to know the student, it becomes a lot easier to determine what you need to do to make the student successful."

Reflecting back on the facilitated resolution, both Linda and Karen said they were very pleased with the outcome.

"Of the eight period times, Michael would be in general education in five of them," Karen said. "The other three would be designated for targeted help. If you start at a lower level of courses in general education, guess what? You never get to the level you want."

"Linda and the family, bless their hearts, have an awesome passion. I personally didn't feel conflict, though I am sure that some teachers did. But when AEA and special education teachers made a recommendation, perhaps they were inexperienced with someone with such passion. What went on from there was truly phenomenal."

Today, Michael is enjoying school as any ninth grader would. He goes to school early to lift weights, walks with friends to a nearby eatery for breakfast, attends classes, manages his own homework, participates in extracurricular activities following school and enjoys authentic friendships.

"It is a full day – but a typical day," Linda said.

Michael also is excelling academically, with the curriculum being modified so he can thoroughly participate.

"The general ed. and special ed. teams are completely a team," she said. "We finally stopped going to the weekly planning meetings because it was clear we were slowing them down. And I didn't feel compelled to go. The teachers were open once they realized they would have supports. That line between special education and general education began to fade."

Linda stresses that her position isn't just ideological, but practical.

"We don't live in a segregated world," she said. "Everyone lives in the inclusive world. We perceive this privilege of an ordinary life which we often taken for granted. Michael wanted that ordinary life and we wanted to help him achieve it. He wants to be included in everything. He wants to go to everything."

And he does. His peers, who have known him since the beginning of their education, wouldn't have it any other way.

Linda recounts an overnight trip that Michael went on a couple years back. There was plenty to do at the camp, including rappelling.

"Michael really dislikes heights," she said. "But when he was coming home from camp, and he called me on

his cell and told me 'I have a big surprise for you.' When the students got off the bus, his friends came rushing over to me to say, 'Michael went rappelling!' And Michael was like, 'you told my secret.' This underscores the importance of friendships. Michael gets inspired by his peers, but his peers get inspired by him."

With high school still ahead of him and lots of football games, it may seem a bit too early to discuss after-graduation plans.

No, says Michael, who just received his driver's learner permit.

"I am thinking about going to Hawkeye Community College, studying agriculture and coming home to work on the farm with my dad."

Nine Iowans join state panel

Nine Iowans were selected to join the state's Special Education Advisory Panel, or SEAP. They are: Susan Etscheidt, Cedar Falls; Joseph McAbee, Des Moines; Craig Barnum, Cedar Rapids; Marcy Beiseigel-Clausen, Muscatine; Jan Collinson, Muscatine; Stephanie Mahoney, Muscatine; Margaret Ebersold, Council Bluffs; Emily Sopko, Forest City; and Kathleen Van Tol, Sioux Center.

The selection by the SEAP nominating committee was not easy, said Chairwoman Karen Thompson.

"We were extraordinarily pleased with the number of highly qualified candidates," Thompson said. "But that made for some very hard decisions on who to select. Still, we are very thrilled to know the depth and breadth of talent and interest throughout the state of Iowa."

Members of SEAP serve three-year terms. The 31-member panel consists of parents, people with disabilities, educators, administrators and stakeholders who are a part the special education community. The panel, which meets at least six times a year, advises the Iowa Department of Education on unmet special education needs within the state and promotes high quality services for children and youth with disabilities.

Other members of the SEAP are Ruth Allison, Des Moines; Kurtis Broeg (vice chair), Parnell; Donita Dettmer, Waverly; Joe Giangreco, Sidney; Dawn Jacobsen, Fayette; Jane Kinney, West Des Moines; Ron Koch, Sioux City; Amy Liddell, Elliott; Susie Lund, Waterloo; Larry Martin, Waterloo; John O'Brien, Fort Dodge; Keri Osterhaus, Des Moines; Melanie Patton, Mount Pleasant; Beth Rydberg, Des Moines; Sandra Smith, Des Moines; Mary Stevens, Cedar Falls; Ruth Stieff, Clive; Karen Thompson (chair), Johnston; Kelly Von Lehmden, Cedar Rapids; Kelly Wallace, Mount Pleasant; Lisa Woiwood, West Des Moines; and Doug Wolf, Des Moines.