

Each and Every Child

Volume 4, Issue 6

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

Getting into the back-to-school groove

Additional time and effort taken ensures a smooth start to the new school year

Janet Kinzie is in back-to-school mode. Three-ring binders. Extra pencils. And lists. Lots of lists.

That's because nothing is going to fall through the cracks for her son Anthony, who returns to school as a ninth grader at Des Moines Christian high school.

"Each teacher will receive a three-ring binder," Janet said. "It includes notes from previous teachers about what they've learned – what works with Anthony. It has some autism basics, such as what is it? It also has things like 'Who is Anthony?' We cover cognitive issues, the sensory stuff such as if he receives too many instructions at once he's not going to get it."

If you think Janet doesn't mince words or easily fall into light conversation,



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Anthony and Angela Kinzie's parents make sure their children are prepared to head back to school. Alas, the pet turtle has to stay home.

you're right. Every sentence is purposeful and packed with information. She learned to do that out of necessity: By fourth grade, her

son had fallen behind grade level, and the future was looking bleak.

"I wanted to close the gap so I went

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to his teachers and said, 'Now how are we going to do that? I need educators, not babysitters. We have until the end of sixth grade to get him up to grade level.'"

So they put their heads together and created a plan. What they got was a Individualized Education Program (IEP) that incentivized Anthony.

"I needed them to teach the core academics between nine and four," Janet said. "We took away all the specials (music, physical education) and focused solely on academics. I knew he could do it. We also implemented the 80 percent rule: If he has less than 80 percent on a test, we will keep loving him, we will keep feeding him, but he doesn't get to play with his electronics."

It worked.



The Kinzie family poses in their backyard.

Today Anthony is a straight-A grade-level student. And he's eager to enter high school. But before the opening bell on that first day, Janet has her lists.

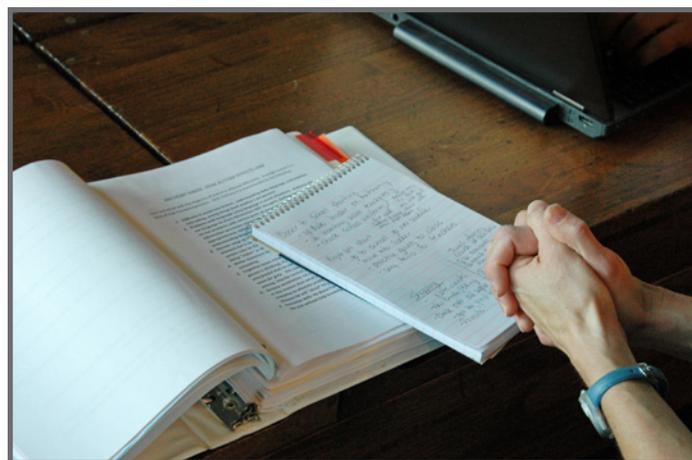
"We will set up meetings with each of the teachers, and they will have a chance to ask questions," Janet rattles off. "We must get a second set of textbooks at home (in the event a textbook is left in a locker), and we need to stock up on notecards because that's how Anthony studies."

And before he heads off to his first class, Anthony will practice going to his classrooms.

"Once he gets used to the new experience of having a new locker, new teachers and a new routine, it will be good," said Anthony's father Craig. "Familiarity is a good thing."

As the dog days of summer grow to a close, Anthony will wrap up his schedule of taking online classes and volunteering in an Alzheimer's unit.

"I am looking forward to getting back



Lists keep Janet Kinzie on track as she works to get her son ready for heading back to school.



Craig Kinzie knows that familiarity ensures best outcomes for his son.



Janet Kinzie makes lists – and keeps to them – to ensure her son's re-entry to class is seamless.

to school," said Anthony, who one day aspires to perhaps be a Halloween costume designer. As proof, he has pages of what he calls doodles of costumes – good drawings by any standards.

But he's shy about compliments.

"I just like to doodle," he said. "When I finish my work, I draw a little."

Helpful tips for a better back-to-school transition this fall

Here are some back-to-school tips that are easy, fun and important. These tips are from Julia Quinn-Szcesuil of Care.com and “It’s So Hard to Be Your Friend” author Rick Lavoie.

- 1. Familiarize.** As the school year approaches, call ahead and ask to meet the principal and teachers and walk around the classroom before school starts. If your child has any kind of sensory processing issues, introduce new clothes (even the new backpack) into the wardrobe in late summer, so he or she has time to adjust.
- 2. Work Behind the Scenes for a Good First Week.** If your child takes the bus, don’t expect it to magically show up. Call to make sure everything you expect to be in place is ready. The last thing you want is to have your child ready to go and a no-show bus. Also, drive the route a few times to let your child know approximately how long it takes to get to school.
- 3. Ease Anxiety with Familiar Faces.** If your child is nervous about the coming school year, familiar faces are welcome when school begins. Take photos of teachers, principals, aides and nurses, (alone or with your child) and of the classrooms, the gym, the cafeteria and the office.
- 4. Map Out the Day.** Ask the teacher about what will happen when your child arrives at school, so you can talk about what to expect. Let your children know feeling jittery is okay, but they also should know who they can talk to.

- 5. Examine the IEP.** Make sure the Individualized Education Program is updated. Gear each item to your child’s needs and abilities. Make sure the IEP outlines performance expectations. If it is only based on what a student can’t do, it squashes creativity. A good IEP is positively worded and strength-based.
- 6. Share the Joy.** Balance the official IEP with a meet-and-greet sheet that you and your child can create. Include things like “what I am good at,” “what bothers me,” “what keeps me motivated” and any other pertinent facts.
- 7. Listen to Your Child’s Feelings.** When your child shows any anxiety about going back to school, the worst thing you can do is brush it off with a “don’t worry about it” response. Slowly bring up the idea of going back to school with your child to allow your child time to soak it in and you as a parent time to deal with any insecurities that may arise.

- 8. Team Up With The School Staff.** Aside from your child’s IEP, prepare a short and straightforward letter to help teachers understand your child’s strengths and challenge areas. Make sure to include specific tips on how to react to certain situations. This letter will help teachers respond smoothly when your child acts nervous or sad.
- 9. Get Your Child Involved As Much As Possible.** Remember you will not be in the classroom with your child at school, so the best thing you can do is to allow he or she to take the reins on all back-to-school activities. For example, take your kids shopping for supplies and encourage them to choose their own clothing.
- 10. Gradually Set New Routine.** Getting used to a new routine, especially after the “lazy hours” of summer, is a challenge for any child. Over the course of a couple weeks, make the gradual transition from summer bed time to school bed time.

