



Each and Every Child

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An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

The Iowa Core and the IEP

The Core-and-more battle cry in educating students on Individualized Education Programs turned to boots-on-the-ground reality this fall as teachers unpacked the Iowa Core in earnest. That's because the Iowa Core is now

required in all schools, all grades.

And though teachers found it daunting at first, they are finding they love it.

"The Iowa Core gives me a guide,

I know exactly where to focus my instruction," said Kim Siberski, a kindergarten-through-third-grade special education teacher at Mitchell Elementary in Ames. The 33-year veteran added, "Sure the Core is a lot to absorb, but it's time to do it. It's a learning curve, it is not easy. But if it is good for kids, it is worth the effort."

Marguerite Diederich, a kindergarten-



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Kim Siberski says the Iowa Core ensures her students are learning the same materials as other students.

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through-fourth-grade teacher at Madrid Elementary in Madrid, said the Iowa Core eliminates guess work.

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“Before the Iowa Core, I would simply put down on the IEP what I would think is important,” said the 39-year veteran. “But in reality, that isn’t good enough. With the Iowa Core, we have gone from what we think is important to a student to what we know is important.”

For Diederich, the Core helps laser-focus the IEPs she writes, and facilitates better communication with parents.

“I like it because it is a framework,” she said. “When I write the IEPs, I can tell the parents where the deficiencies are very clearly. So if a third grader is supposed to be working on fact and opinion – some of the higher-level thinking – we can discuss with the parents specific issues. It makes it easy for the parents to understand.”

One feature of the Iowa Core is that it enables teachers to pinpoint precisely where students’ deficiencies are, and

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trace them back to the standards in which they derailed.

“Through the Core, we may discover that some students didn’t learn some of the Iowa Core standards earlier in their schooling,” said Brad Niebling, a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Core expert. “For



Marguerite Diederich says the Iowa Core enhances her IEPs.

example, if a third-grade student on an IEP is reading at a first-grade level, we can actually track student progress back through those Core standards. In this example, part of this student’s instruction needs to be on the missing first-grade standards.

“Once the student at the first-grade reading level masters the first-grade standards, the more quickly she will excel and eventually work to be at grade level.”

That isn’t to say the focus turns solely to first-grade-level education. To the contrary.

“Students with IEPs can still participate in the grade-level standards using things like accommodations,” Niebling said. “You know this particular child can learn grade-level content when listening. So what you do is you ensure an accommodation that the child gets grade-level skills by having literature read to her for part of her instruction. But you also work on the first-grade level Iowa Core standards

to tackle the achievement gap.”

Ensuring that a student is being instructed in grade-level content beefs up the overall education, Siberski said.

“If the general education teacher is talking about fractions, and you are talking about ways to make five, instruction won’t be consistent,” she said. “As a teacher, I want to try to keep my students working on the same things that the other general education kids are. When they are studying a shared piece in the classroom, it will make more sense to them. I find that as we talk about it, they are starting to really come along. If everyone else is learning it, they should be learning it, too.”

Siberski says the Iowa Core has helped her focus on the order in which skills must be mastered.

“How do you know what the progression of skills is if you don’t follow that roadmap?” she said.



Marguerite Diederich

"Developmentally, some skills need to be learned before others. It makes me better as a teacher when I understand the progression of skill building."

Diederich said the skills her students master give them a richer, more meaningful educational experience, helping set them up for life as learners.

"The Core gets beyond simply recalling information," she said. "Most of my kids can tell me the who or the what or the where of the

story. I want my kids to be able to predict, to infer, to know main ideas, to draw conclusions. My kids need to be exposed to everything to be successful."

Siberski said the Iowa Core unites general and special education efforts.

"If you are not teaching the Core, what are you doing to teach the kids? If you are teaching something different, that will make the gap larger," she said. "We can spend a few extra minutes reinforcing a skill. The Iowa Core puts all of us, general education and special education, on the same page. That only makes it good for the kids. Today, we collaborate, we use the same terminology. And our students are learning the same standards at the same time. Consistency is key."

And though Siberski and Diederich are Iowa Core fans, that is not to suggest they think it is a cakewalk.

"My first reaction to the Core was 'wow,'" Diederich said. "Honestly, it was a bit overwhelming to start with. You have to take the time to unpack the Core. Work with others,

collaborate with gen. ed. teachers. You can't do it yourself. That is where you become a team for a child. Read up on it, find strategies that will help differentiate, to expose those kids to these standards."

"I have been told that most people who have taught as long as I aren't as willing to make changes," Siberski said. "Every time I see something that improves the kids, I do it. Why not? I don't pretend to know everything. And the Iowa Core works."



Kim Siberski



Next Month

This school has been named the best in the state when it comes to special education delivery. Read about what this team does in the December issue of *Each and Every Child*.