



# Each and Every Child

Volume 5, Issue 1

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

## A personal journey into special education

*Jason Volmer's life from student to teacher*

If it hadn't been for the few advocates in Jason Volmer's life, he would've been destined for a low-wage job. Or much, much worse.

But those advocates – in the form of strong-willed parents and a smattering of teachers – saw in Volmer what others refused to. He was bright. He was creative. But he was in special education.

"Many teachers dismissed me as stupid," he said. "Teachers in elementary school were good to me, but when I went into junior high, I think it was very hard for some of those teachers to see past my bad writing, poor spelling, and IEP (Individualized Educational Program). My seventh-grade English teacher, no matter what I did, would always give me a 'C' on all my papers. Finally, my mother wrote something, and had me copy it into my own writing. I got a C. That teacher could not see past the messiness and who I was. It didn't



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

*Jason Volmer takes special education personally – very personally.*

matter what I put on that paper. It was extremely upsetting."

And it got worse.

"I remember in science we had to swap papers with fellow classmates to check

answers," he said. "And the kid who is checking mine said to the teacher, 'Mr. So and So, this person has misspelled words, should I count them wrong?' And the teacher said to me, 'Jason, they weren't kidding, you really do have a spelling problem,' and then he told the

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**Jason Volmer**

kid to mark it wrong. That was mortifying. It was that public humiliation, it was horrible."

But, to borrow liberally from a song, if they could see him now. Today, the 43-year-old Volmer is coordinator for special education at the Urbandale Community School District. His early experience as a student in special education, he admits, had some long-lasting effects on self esteem. But it also produced an iron will to ensure all students in his district get the very best education from every teacher.

"I think that many of our students can reach expectations if we set them," he said. "I achieved the level I did because people believed I was a smart, capable person, and not achieving was not acceptable to my parents. In the special education system, the intent is to have a relentless increase in resources until the student achieves. If a child doesn't meet expectations, the next question is, 'what do we need to change to get to that rate we want?'"

Volmer's journey into special education began in third grade when it was noted that he had severe deficits in reading and writing.

"I knew what was going on at the time, but was confused about it," he said. "Third grade was a time of crisis for me. I

was not happy at school, my self esteem was really conflicted. I remember vividly being so lost in some subjects, particularly language arts. I was just miserable."

It also was at that time that Volmer's mother started talking about disabilities in general, and dyslexia in particular.

"My parents started talking to me about having a learning disability," he said. "I remember processing this. I was getting ready to go to a piano lesson, and mom was explaining all of this to me. I was very confused because I thought was I was dumb. That was a very tumultuous year."

It was his parents and that smattering of teachers that kept young Jason moving forward.

"If I had not had that kind of advocacy, I would've been one of those kids who was just getting C's and D's, scraped by to graduate, found a job in manual labor or retail," he said. "I would be one of those

people who go to work and wait for the day to the end. It was essential that my parents believed in me, that some of those teachers believed in me, that they expected nothing other than I am going to be successful, I'm going to college, I'm going to have a career. Many students can do just that if we have that attitude. From first grade on, we set those high expectations. We expect that. We give resources. We remove the barriers.

"As difficult as some of those teachers were on me, it only really takes a few teachers to believe in me, and I thankfully I had it, along with some very strong-willed parents. I don't envy children who don't have that kind of parental advocacy. I really don't mind when we have parents who we could consider as difficult, because they are doing what's right for their children – just as mine had done for me."

Volmer's unique experience gives him credibility with parents.



*There is a strong emphasis on exiting students from special education into the general education system at the Urbandale Community School District. Special education coordinator Jason Volmer says each school has a team consisting of the principal, special education teachers, the district's behavioral analyst, and Heartland Area Education Agency's special education consultant and psychologist. Together, they discuss each child's progress and, just as important, focus on the students who are falling short of goal. This support team information is then reviewed by each child's IEP team.*

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*Teachers who feel highly capable feel more empowered. That is the philosophy that Urbandale school district's special education coordinator Jason Volmer follows. He says that finding barriers to success – and removing them – is key.*



*What are the roadblocks special education teachers face in having their students achieve at a high rate? That is a regular part of the discussion at the schools in the Urbandale Community School District. They have found that the barriers have included the need for ongoing training, aligning work to best practices, and giving teachers across the district access to evidence-based materials.*

"I tell parents that I know what it is like," he said. "I understand that when we put a child into special education, it is a big deal. We are saying that child has a disability. It is both good and bad. There can be a consequence for that child socially. But it's better than experiencing failure."

In the end, a teacher's role is undeniably linked to success.

"Teachers have the power to make a kid's day or wreck it," he said. "When I experienced the humiliating experiences, that's all I could think about the rest of the day. But on the other hand, when a teacher validates you, that is the kind of stuff that makes you want to keep going. It makes all the difference."

"Teachers have that power in them, and when they do well, students start defining themselves differently. I don't think we as educators really know or appreciate how much we play in the role of students' lives."

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*At the Urbandale Community School District, the talk among special education teachers focuses on accelerating learning for their students. That includes building core skills with an aim toward independence. Here, special education coordinator Jason Volmer meets with the special education team at Jensen Elementary School.*

