



Each and Every Child

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Getting to the core of the matter

Elementary school creates model to ensure Iowa Core access

Fort Dodge's curriculum director Stacey Cole pondered one day whether students on Individualized Education Programs were receiving instruction

through the lens of the Iowa Core.

"Do all kids receive core instruction in the classroom?" she asked one teacher.

The teacher responded, "No, why would we do that? Their needs are met in special education."

Cole got her answer, though it wasn't the answer she hoped to hear.

At about the same time, two teachers across town at Duncombe Elementary School were working on a plan to ensure their students – special and general education – were engaging in the Iowa standards. Their solution? Co-teach. That was last year. By year's end? A full 93 percent were proficient in reading. That included six Level II students, comprising 25 percent of the class.

"We knew that with the necessity of including the kids in the core for more of their day, that co-teaching would be best for the kids with Individualized Education Programs," said Jody Halverson, a special education teacher. "The end result was that it was best for



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Curriculum Director Stacey Cole and Principal Pat Reding discuss the school's success.

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all of the students in our class.”

General education teacher Tricia Dohrn said co-teaching just made sense.

“Let’s look at a kiddo who can’t count past 39,” she said. “Traditionally it would be determined that he does not have the prerequisite skills to find success in second grade math. So he is then pulled from grade-level content to focus on the skills he doesn’t have yet. While he works on the prerequisite skills, he misses more and more grade-level content, and therefore the gap continues to widen. Take that same kid and allow him access to grade-level content in an environment that has adequate support and scaffolding and allow him the opportunity to build problem-solving strategies that work for him, and the gap shrinks.”

When Dohrn and Halverson first approached their principal Pat Reding with the co-teaching plan, he was justifiably skeptical.

“I have seen special education and general education teachers cohabitating in a room before, but that was the extent of it,” Reding said. “It was



Jody Halverson works with a couple of her students.

anything but inclusion.”

But Reding was impressed with the teachers’ plan, and gave the go-ahead.

“It turns out that they were powerful from day one,” he said. “They are tremendously powerful educators in their own right, but combining their efforts created a solid team.”

“This truly was an equal partnership,” Halverson said. “We could plan every second of the day.

“At the beginning, it was Mrs. Dohrn’s class, but that changed after a while. And we also had one of the best paras in the world, Kim Gordon. The kids really had three teachers.”

The educators built a lot of reading into science and social studies, and used an hour each day for small-group instruction.

“Trish pulled some of the kids to work on comprehension, and Kim was able to roam around,” Halverson said. “We grouped the kids based on their abilities

and needs, not on their labels.”

And the duo made sure all of the students’ needs were met.

“The kids had a chance to be involved in everything,” Dohrn said. “But Jody might bring three kids over to a table, IEP or not, in which they needed extra scaffolding. The goal is always to build skills.”

“We grouped the kids based on their abilities and needs, not on their labels.”

The curriculum director initially saw the co-teaching as a means of ensuring access to the Iowa Core for all students.

“We had a lot of conversation about the Iowa Core, and how all kids need access,” Cole said. “But if you are having kids go somewhere else for instruction in, say, reading, then access to the Iowa Core is eliminated.”

And there was another benefit Cole



Tricia Dohrn

didn't foresee.

"When I think about this through the lens of a critical educator, I believe our general education kids really benefited from this model," she said. "When we started the inclusion, it was from the perspective that it would benefit students on IEPs. But I would argue that it was a great benefit for our general education kids. Our general education kids were 100 percent proficient – if you want to talk about who benefited."

Dohrn and Halverson heartily agree.

"We think co-teaching was especially beneficial to students who are not identified" as having a learning disability, Dohrn said.

"We know we kept some kids from having to enter special education, and we challenged the kids who were highly proficient because of the level of differentiation we were able to accomplish."

Dumcombe's needs this year put the full-time co-teaching model on hold – something the teachers and principal are hopeful will return. It is, they agree, a model that needs to be eventually made permanent.

For Dohrn, it hits close to home.

"My oldest son has learning difficulties," she said. "If my son's teacher doesn't believe he can fully learn, what would that mean to me? It is our job to find out the way to learn. Each kid has a different way to learn."

"Agreed," Halverson said. "You can't place limits on kids."

Why this teacher likes the core

Special education teacher Rachel Kruse makes no bones about it: She likes the Iowa Core, or standards.

"The core is a guide for me to create relevant Individualized Education Program goals," said Kruse, who teaches at Danville Elementary School in far southeast Iowa. "They are meaningful and aggressive goals, more so than in the past. We have upped our ante here with interventions. I expect my kids to be where their peers are in general education – and then some. I try to get them ahead of their peers."

Kruse finds the standards to be a scaffold for instruction.

"In math, for instance, there are a lot of subskills," she said. "The Iowa Core makes it very clear where the students need to go. It articulates where the kid should have been, where they need to go and how to get there."

The standards, Kruse said, ensure rigorous instruction takes place every day. Just don't tell her they are too hard.

"I don't think anything is too hard, you just have to find a way for the students to learn them," she said. "It's not easy, but where there is a will, there is a way."

Principal Steve Ita, who himself started as a special education teacher 33 years ago, said the Iowa Core represents a sea change when he first started teaching. *(An interesting aside: Ita not only grew up and attended the Danville schools, so did a full five generations of his family; his grandson will soon be the sixth generation.)*

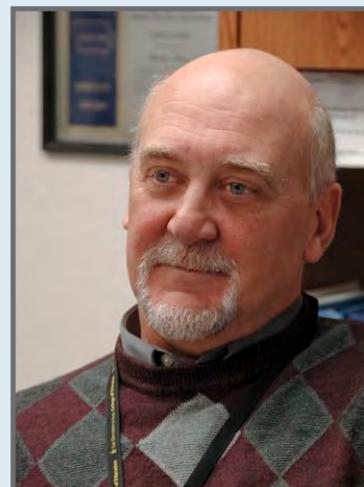


Rachel Kruse says Iowa Core expedites, focuses her students' learning.

"Back then, we were trying to use a curriculum that was more survival based: teach them how to use money, take them out into the community," he said. "With the Iowa Core, it is very focused. It's not like we threw everything out and started brand new. Yes, we have upped the ante. With special education kids, we are now taking them to a new level."

For Kruse's part, she has already seen a dynamic change in her students.

"I have seen a lot of success where we can move those kids through quickly in reading," she said. "A lot of kids this year are surprising me. I didn't initially know how it was going to go, but I kept pushing and they succeeded. It's awesome to see those a-ha moments when a kid says, 'I get it, I do get it!'"



Principal Steve Ita

A question-and-answer with Rachel Kruse

What was your initial reaction to the Iowa Core?

My initial reaction to the Iowa Core was “What exactly is Iowa Core and how will it benefit me being a special education teacher?” Of course I saw the benefits for general education teachers because it acts like a road map. New approaches and new strategies are always appearing in the education world; it is part of teaching. So when the Iowa Core came out, I researched it and tried to get to know it first before I passed any judgment (which is hard to do in a career that is constantly changing). A question that I frequently have asked myself is “Where do I want my students to be and how will I know when we get there?” In my opinion, the Iowa Core helps to answer this question.

How have the standards changed your practices?

I sometimes struggle creating reading, writing and math IEP goals. The Iowa Core has helped guide me into making meaningful and purposeful goals. When creating goals, I first think of the end and the Iowa Core has helped me see what the end might look like for students. I have high goals for my special education students and “I Expect Progress” (IEP) on a daily basis. Therefore I work backwards with the guidance of the Iowa Core to create IEP goals that each student can be and feel successful at.

How do you find the Iowa Core lends to a deeper subject-matter meaning among your students on IEPs?

Being a K-3 special education teacher, my reading instruction is often based around the foundational skills found

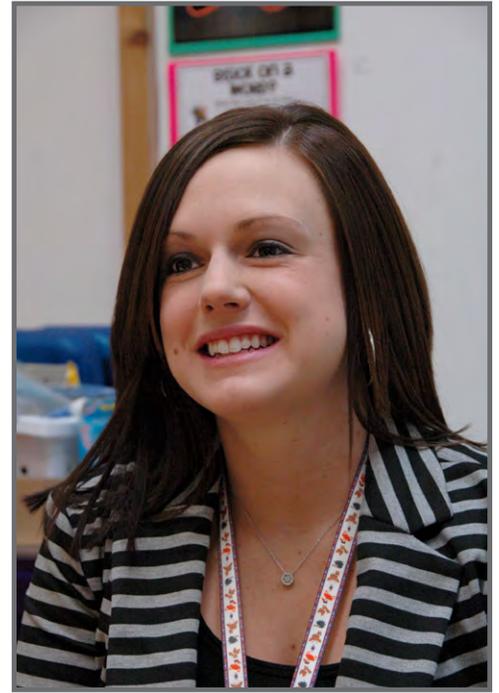
in the Iowa Core. My thought behind teaching around foundational skills is that you have to learn how to read first before you can read to learn. Many times I do not get to work on other skills that involve comprehension and vocabulary, but because the Iowa Core is in place I know that these skills are also being taught in the general education classroom so I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders as a special education teacher because I know that I can hit on the foundational skills harder. The core has guided me to deeper, more purposeful, and more meaningful subject-matter that has made me more aware of the skills that students need in order to be successful 21st century learners. And isn't our goal as educators to make our students successful adults?

Have you found the core difficult to unpack?

We, as a district, are working on unpacking the standards. We have been trying to do this for a couple of years now, but still have a lot of work ahead of us. The Iowa Core is deep and takes a lot of work to truly understand each standard and to be able to teach to them. I have found it more helpful to work to unpack the standards as a small team. There are also many resources where the standards are already unpacked.

Have you had any a-ha moments as it relates to the core?

My biggest a-ha moment as it relates to the core is last year when I was struggling to create a math goal for one of my first grade students. I thought I knew what his math skills were but I was struggling to know where to go with his new goal. I started back at kindergarten and, looking at the



Rachel Kruse

kindergarten standards, checked to see if he had mastered every one of those skills. After doing that, I noticed some gaps in his math skills and I gained a better understanding of what his math goal should look like. I do believe that the core can be used as a road map for special education teachers to make sure students have certain skills mastered, as well as seeing where they need to go.

What would you say to dispel the notion that the Iowa Core is “too hard” for students on IEPs?

In my opinion, nothing is “too hard” for students with IEPs. Our job as special education teachers is to find a way for students to understand the content. Will that be challenging? Most definitely, but won't the students and you feel pretty great when they understand the content that their peers are learning? If we don't hold special education students to the same expectations as their peers then there will never be a chance for them to exit special education services. I wholeheartedly believe that special education is not a dead end.