



Each and Every Child



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Special education and teacher-leaders

Waukee teachers take team approach to effecting best outcomes

WAUKEE – When Kara Ozbun entered her Level III classroom for the first time last fall, she didn't know what to expect.

But the 15-year veteran knew she was facing a daunting task: Not only was she in a new district, but she would have to learn from scratch everything

about her new charges before classes would shortly start.

Then she met Kelli Palcic. And Jennifer Kopp. And Amy Hayes. And Annie Miller.

As the special education instructional strategists for the Waukee Community School District, they were able to quickly bring Ozbun up to snuff on students, strategies and Individualized Education Programs.

"The level of support they provide in this district is amazing," she said. "You never feel alone. This is very new to me."

Through the district's teacher-leadership program, which made its official debut last fall, Waukee dedicated four instructional strategists to special education. Prior, the district had one dedicated special education instructional strategist – Kelli Palcic –



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Derek O'Riley

Kara Ozbun works with a student as instructional strategists look on.

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for the district's 13 schools.

"The depth of service is unbelievably and significantly more," said Peg Erke, the district's Director of Student Services. "What we are doing mirrors a lot of the work Kelli did previously, but we know we are going deeper to support more teachers."

In selecting the three additional strategists, Erke said, she worked to get a cross section of skills so they could lean on each other. That was a winning strategy, the strategists agreed.

"It was interesting to see how we decided to serve teachers," Palcic said. "We decided to work together to get to know all teachers and then tease out which strategist would support which teacher based on the particular need."

The strategists focused on instructional practices, goals, data, literacy programs.

"We try to provide teachers with different options," Kopp said. "When a student is not improving in reading, we can dig in to the programming, and make instructional changes."

It's not just teachers and students who benefit.

"The volume of instruction has expanded tremendously," Palcic said. "And it's not just focused on a pocketful of teachers. We have provided training for all of the district's 205 associates."

It doesn't end at just training.

"When we go in to model for the teachers, we model for those associates, too," Palcic said. "The associates work so much with our students. They need to have some of the same skills for things such as behavior and reteaching."

Strategist Hayes stresses that this is all done through teamwork.

"We focus on being out in the trenches with teachers," she said. "We make decisions together and really analyze, 'OK, what is our next step.'"

Erke said a critical component of the district's success is through collaboration with Heartland Area Education Agency consultants. They formally meet once a month with the Heartland team to ensure everyone is staying on track.

"When our strategists and our Heartland friends work together, it is more than an 8-to-4 collaboration," she said. "They frequently call



Top - Jenny Kopp
Middle - Kelli Palcic
Bottom - Amy Hayes



Kara Ozbun



Peg Erke

each other at night and say, 'hey, I'm having problems identifying what this student needs.'"

The strategists have been especially helpful when the district hires a new teacher – something it does frequently since the district is one of the fastest-growing districts in the state. Just this past year, they brought on 16 new special education teachers.

"A lot of new teachers don't have hands-on experience in developing IEPs and making decisions based on data," Erke said.

The strategists also work with general education teachers.

"When we meet with general education teachers, it is really about the materials you can use to support that student to get him back to where his peers are," Palcic said.

Finally, Erke is seeing the instructional strategists as key to retaining special education talent.

"They are no longer working in isolation," she said. "You have people out there who are there to help."

And Teacher Ozbun feels no isolation.

"When I came here, I knew I would have a mentor," she said. "But I didn't realize they would be this dedicated in helping me. Being a seasoned teacher, it is easy to assume, 'Oh, she has got this, she knows what she's doing.'

"But everyone has to continue learning. Everyone needs support and help."

Becoming mainstream?

When sped teachers are put in the front seat...



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Teacher Emily O'Connell works with a small reading group.

VAN HORNE – The teacher-leader program at the Benton Community School District took a turn that they initially didn't expect: The district determined that the special education teachers held the tools to boost academic performance among general education students.

So, they had the special education teachers teach their general education counterparts some tools of the trade.

It all started last year when staff were looking for ways to improve student performance.

"One of things we did last year is look at the Iowa Assessments to see what were the biggest areas we needed to improve in," said Laurie Donald, an instructional coach in the district. "Up to then, we had been relying on gut instinct rather than testing. We started giving monthly assessments to have students read a passage. It was the special education teachers who lead us on that."

By last fall, they had baseline data from which to determine progress, or lack thereof. And in September, they de-

buted what they call Bobcat Time (the district's mascot is a Bobcat). Here, in the last 30 minutes of school every day, students are given the option to sign up for enrichment opportunities, study hall or working with teachers on learning they have questions on or placed in skills recovery groups consisting of no more than eight students. Each skill-recovery group is aimed at working on specific skill deficiencies.

"We used a lot of data to determine who needed what," said Emily O'Connell, a model teacher and special education teacher in the middle and high schools. "To gather our first initial group, if they had below 71 percent in four out of six test settings, they were put into a skill group."

The skills groups meet for six weeks, and students are then assessed on their progress. Those who do well leave that skill group.

It was a conscious decision to not include special education students, Donald said, because most of their coursework already focuses on skill building. Instead, the Bobcat Time en-

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abled students on Individualized Education Programs a chance for enrichments, such as looking into career or college options.

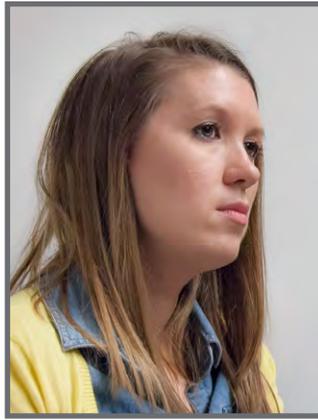
Some of the students who were assigned to the skill-building teams were a surprise.

“We found that some kids needed reading goals who hadn’t ever had a reading goal,” said Kal Goodchild, the middle school principal. “We discovered that they compensated all along with their deficiency through the years.”

“I saw that some kids would get A’s in class, but in an assessment they would do terrible,” said Jen Bange, middle school English-Language Arts teacher. “We didn’t know how much they were struggling. They worked so hard to compensate.”

In one case, a student confronted Jo Prusha, the district’s director of curriculum and instructional services.

“At the end of the school day, a student came up to me and said, ‘there’s no way I should be in this group!’ She then saw Laurie (Donald), and came back to me and said, ‘well, it’s all me.’ Laurie showed her the data, something that tradition-



Emily O’Connell



Jen Bange



Michelle Smith

ally school systems don’t do well.”

But Benton Community shares data with all of its students.

“It is very eye-opening for kids,” said instructional coach Alex Olson. “Kids started seeing how tests are attached to what they learn. It’s very powerful for them.”

All of this was an especially challenging transition in the high school, where the chief focus has been on content, not skill building.

“The focus on the skills and getting it to the students really did make a difference,” Prusha said. “Sometimes we get so focused on content and forget about

the skills embedded within the content we are teaching. This was a collaborative concerted effort to focus on skill development.”

Still, the transition to getting general education teachers to embrace changes were challenging.

“The pushback was hard,” said Ryan Junge, the special education director. “This is skill-based work, and the general education teachers were going to have to differentiate in their own classroom.

“I think it was very big that the special education teachers would give training on differentiation in high school. In high school, they are content driven. That’s why it was a natural to have the special education teachers teach the others. They have been doing this forever, they are used to data.”

Rob Arnold, activities director and assistant high school principal, said learning the special education techniques is akin to peeling back layers of an onion – one layer at a time.

“We just kept finding that second layer,” Arnold said. “It was the special education staff who led us through it. They taught us how to test and teach skills to those kids.”



Front row: James Bieschke, Jo Prusha, Laurie Donald

Back row: Alex Olson, Ryan Junge, Kal Goodchild, Rob Arnold