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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Educators and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports

Gap? *What* gap???

Southeast Polk's Willowbrook Elementary has all but eliminated the education gap between students with disabilities and those without.

These statistics don't lie:

• 82.4 percent of students on IEPs at Willowbrook were proficient in math compared to the school's overall average at 83.4 percent. Statewide, the average proficiency in math among students on IEPs grades 3 through 5 was 49.37 percent. Willowbrook performs a full 33.03 percentage points higher than the state average!

• 76.5 percent of students on IEPs at Willowbrook were proficient in reading compared to the school's overall average at 84 percent. Statewide, the average proficiency for students on IEPs in reading is 44.86 percent, putting Willowbrook up 31.64 percentage points above the average Iowa school!

Lisa Christians works with some of her students.

On top of all of this, the roughly 500-student school in central Iowa actually identifies fewer students in need of special education than the average (9 percent of the students at Willowbrook are on IEPs compared to the state average of 13 percent).

So what is going on at Willowbrook? Is it that the students at Willowbrook enter school performing at higher levels than their peers throughout the state? No.

It's culture. It's philosophy. It's commitment to evidence-based practices, targeted and intensive levels of support for all learners including students with IEPs. And it's data-based decision making with the intention of getting children with IEPs to perform at grade level.

Enter Principal Robin Norris and the school's two special education teachers, Lisa Christians and Shannon Andersen.

Robin is quick to say the credit does not belong solely to the trio.

"It's not just the efforts of Lisa and Shannon – it's the whole staff," Robin said. "We don't segregate our staffs. It's not where the gen. ed. teachers say, 'those are your kids, these are mine.' The entire staff feels ownership for all students. They seek a collaborative effort, not a departmentalized one where special education is seen as a 'place' for students."

Regular collaboration gets everyone on the same page as to how to approach challenges.

"We do a lot of brainstorming in my room," Lisa said. "We work on the exact same strategies that are used in all of the other rooms so that the child becomes more familiar and at ease."

"We do a lot of intervention, and try to prevent them from having to go into special education," Robin said. "We don't give up. Lisa and Shannon not only teach students, but serve as a resource to teachers in the development of interventions."

But collaboration is only one ingredient in Willowbrook's formula for success. Data is a critical component.

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Willowbrook's tips for success

• Collaboration among all educators, not just those in special education.

• Having a passion for knowing that everyone can achieve.

• Teaching grade-level content to everyone.

• Professional development, led by teachers, around proven teaching strategies that includes a follow-up of sharing planned and implemented ideas.

• Regular and consistent contact with parents.

• Using data religiously to make instructional decisions and adjusting instruction.

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"Data is the only way we know if we're doing right by the student," Shannon said. "If the child is way above the line, we know we need to up the ante and challenge the child more. If the child is below the line, we need to change what we are doing and how we're doing it. I meet with classroom teachers each week, and we make modifications to instruction as needed, keeping in mind a student's IEP."

Shannon Andersen doesn't waste time on the first day of school.

A teacher's work can be enhanced by communicating with parents regularly.

"I talk to my parents most every single day, whether it is by phone, email or even on the curb as they are picking up their children," Shannon said. "I do it because it's important that the parents know what was going on at school so that they can continue the same work at home."

"We tailor the communication to what the parent prefers," Lisa added. "I had one father ask me to keep a daily log because he wanted to know in detail how his son was handling school. I always made sure I listed the positives first – and always made sure I had more positives on the list than the areas of improvement. The dad told me how much he appreciated it."

Building trust is also a critical component in the education process.

"We discover ways to be positive," Lisa said. "It's a relationship. The children need to feel comfortable with us in order for them to succeed. For instance, one child feared failure so much that it created a self-fulfilling prophesy. I had to reinforce to him that I liked him whether he failed or not. And it worked – once he built trust in me, his fear went away and he started succeeding."

"We don't just say that every child can learn. We believe it, passionately."

- Principal Robin Norris

Holding positions that frequently engender burn out, Robin doesn't have to worry about Shannon or Lisa going anywhere.

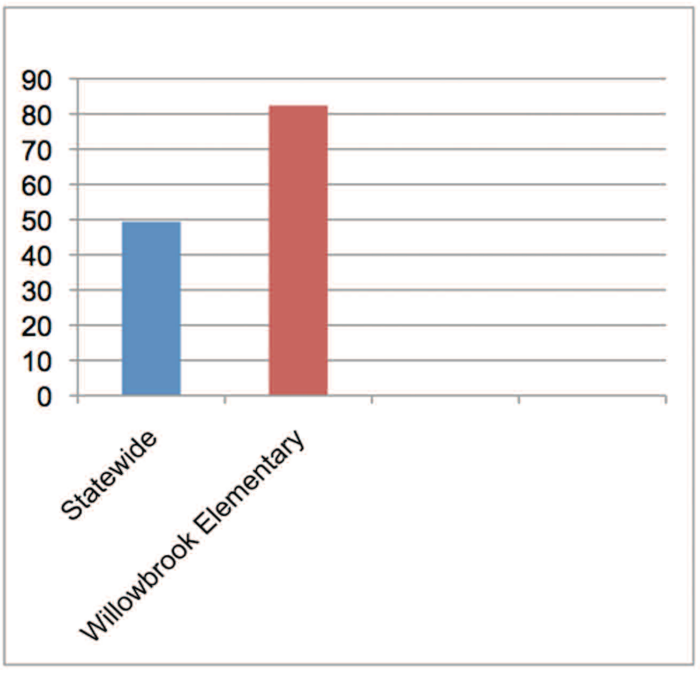
"When I get up in the morning, I can't wait to get here," Lisa said. "It's really rewarding to see the growth in the children when they are given the tools to succeed," Shannon added.

Robin is understandably proud of her team at Willowbrook, but modestly sums it up:

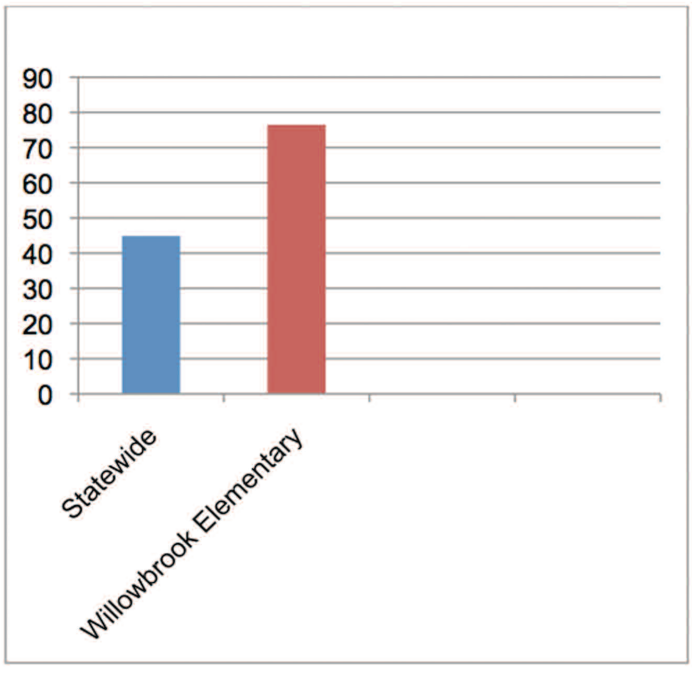
"It's a cultural thing. We don't just say that every child can learn. We believe it, passionately. Everyone collaborates on the needs of each child. We expect every child to meet expectations."

And as the statistics show, they do.

Percent of students on IEPs proficient in math



Percent of students on IEPs proficient in reading



Intensifing your instruction

Responding to the way a child thinks enhances performance

By Dr. Sharon Vaughn

Promising research suggests that integrating strategies that support cognitive processing through academic instruction may accelerate academic progress.

Educators must consider whether their instruction is responsive to the way each student thinks. Many students with significant learning difficulties in reading and mathematics have cognitive problems. Promising research suggests that integrating strategies that support cognitive processing through academic instruction may accelerate academic progress.

Here are tips:

• Make your thinking "visible" to students by demonstrating "think-alouds" on how you approach problems, reflect on text, answer questions, or give yourself feedback. Say, for example, "Before I read this text, I see that it will be difficult to understand. First, I look for key words and write them down to see if I can figure out what they mean when I read the text. Second, I look at the title, the headings, and the questions at the end of the text. I think about what this text is going to be about, and I try to make connections while I'm reading. Third, while I read, I stop to see whether I have learned any information to help me answer the questions."

• When students struggle, determine what strategies they are using to solve problems or understand text. Ask a student to read aloud to you. When the student misses a word, wait until he or she finishes reading and then ask the student to tell you the words missed. Ask the student, "What do you do when you don't know how to read a word?" Show the student effective strategies for reading the missed word (e.g., teach the student the phonics elements).

a. Teach students to understand and to identify "breakdowns" in their understanding. One way is by teaching students to ask themselves questions to determine if they are making progress. For example, when reading, ask students to stop and think about whether there were any words or ideas they did not understand. Then ask students to reread and figure out how to "repair" their problems. Similarly, when solving word problems, students should ask themselves whether they understood the problem. If not, show them how to paraphrase it, putting it into their own words.

b. Making inferences when reading sentences, paragraphs, and multi-paragraph texts can also enhance self-monitoring. Ask students to read the text aloud and think about what the author is saying. If students have trouble figuring out the author's intention, ask them questions about previous or subsequent text and show them how to put ideas together to make an inference.

c. Rather than providing person-directed feedback (e.g., "You are a good writer."), offer feedback specific to the task or the process (e.g., "You organized your written response well. That was helpful to me as I read your report."). This kind of feedback helps students attribute successes accurately.

Next month:
Differentiating instruction

About the author

Dr. Sharon Vaughn of the University of Texas at Austin is a nationally recognized special education expert. She is the H.E.Hartfelder/Southland Corp Regents Chair of Human Development and executive director of the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at The University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of more than 10 books and over 100 articles.