

October 2013

Volume 3, Issue 5

Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

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

Power in numbers

Afterschool program unites minds, ambitions

Teachers in Waterloo's high schools were alarmed at what they were seeing: Too many students receiving special education services were getting into trouble outside school.

"Some of the students on IEPs were being swept into the correctional system or becoming disengaged," said Amy Alfrey, Waterloo's special education coordinator. "We were wondering, 'what is causing this?'"

So teachers from the city's high schools got together. There was something missing in the students' lives, a link, perhaps, that would successfully bring them back into the school system. And through no twist of words, the Link was born, an afterschool program designed to infuse school with real-world examples.

"We realized that the missing link was that they didn't feel connected to the schools," Alfrey said. "They needed something to belong to, they needed some caring adults and peers."

Today, some 24 students from East and West high schools participate in Link, in which the program's title has even morphed into a verb: "are we linking today?"

While the high schools initially had their own individual programs, the students threw the longstanding intra-district rivalry aside to combine the programs.

"The kids preferred it," Alfrey said.

And they do.

At a recent Link meeting, sophomores Alexis Jones, Chris Lien, Shareese Gamblin and Zavyon Nix were planning the upcoming year's activities. As facilitators – now done by students instead of teachers – they have chosen this year's theme: "Focus on the Future."

"It's an easy way for us to show everything we're doing," Chris said.

And it's the future that guides these students. Link takes them off campus, visiting all sorts of businesses and doing all sorts of activities – things they indeed will need in life, from opening a checking account to asking for a job application. They also go to the middle schools to explain to peers what high school is like in hopes of allaying fears. It keeps the students busy, excited – and learning the social, or soft skills required to be successful in life.

"One of the biggest things I see is that socially they are doing a lot better than the students who are not participating," said Katie Kimber, transitions facilitator in the district.

"It is a lot easier for them to get jobs or a job interview, or asking for accommodations in college – they practice that in here at Link."

Krista Pugh, the special education instructional coach at East, said social skills should not be discounted in a student's education.

"You need social skills in everything you do in life," she said. "You need them for employment, you need them for relationships."

And bonus: The newfound connection to school has improved the students' academics.

"I see where the kids started, and feel like they are totally transformed," Kimber said. "A graduate who was plugged in all the time listening to music and head down and wasn't talking to anyone. Now she is engaged with others, and I'm so excited that she has that – it is something she'll have for the rest of the life."

Something the students notice is a confidence they lacked just a year ago.

"The Link helps me out of my shyness," Alexis said. "I had a problem around big groups and just wanted to stay at home and be by myself in my own room. Now I am learning how to be around other people and having fun. I look forward to coming to the meetings because I get to meet new students and new people and get to know what they are like."

For Zavyon, the Link keeps his life safe and productive.

"It gives me more stuff to do after school," he said. "Before I was at home playing video games. The Link keeps me off the streets."

The afterschool program also establishes a new social network.

"For me, it means a time to get away from the family and be with people who have the same similarities and interests as me," Chris said. "I really enjoy it because most of the time I am uptight and serious about getting my school work done. Being here I can be calm and enjoy things."

The Link for Shareese has given her a new perspective on her life.

"The Link has made me more successful," Shareese said. "It makes me feel like it's pushing me more in life. It gets me off the street and helps me do more. It keeps me out of trouble and gets me out of the home instead of watching TV. It makes me think more. My parents say I have changed; I've been talking to them about what I want to do – I never used to before. This makes me care about school and about my future."

There's plenty to plan for the upcoming school year, but one thing is definite: The students will host a picnic party for friends, family and teachers at the end of the school year in which they do everything from menu selection to cooking.

"It is something they did last year and really liked it," Krista said. "It was quite successful."

And today, dreams that may have gone unrealized now seem within arm's reach. Shareese is thinking about college and pursuing a medical career. Zavyon likes working with his hands, and is looking to the engineering field. Alexis is looking at more immediate needs, like studying for her driver's permit. And Chris envisions becoming a cartoonist.

"I am thinking about being an artist and writer – perhaps be a cartoonist based on our cats and my sister and my brother," he said. "The cats have great personalities."

Notes from our readers

'Hooray' for Tripoli

Thank you for bringing Michael's story ("Conflict Resolution" with Michael Biermann in September 2013's issue of Each and Every Child). It's a good reminder that we (teachers) must teach the individual child! We are teaching children, not programs!

Hooray for those teachers in Tripoli. I wish more districts would use the approach of bringing in a third party. Most times, people go back to what they know or have always done, which doesn't mean it's working.

I read your newsletters and have bought several of the professional books suggested in them. I like reading what other Iowa districts are doing – we can always learn from each other. Thank you for providing this quality information.

*Cindy Reighard,
Des Moines public school teacher*

'Hope still exists'

I have a 9-year-old son who was diagnosed with autism and a speech impairment at the age of two-and-a-half. At that time, he struggled with communication (he spoke only a dozen words), feeding issues, aggression, rigidity, and socialization issues. His preschool teacher told us that there was a good chance that he might never be able to express nor communicate his feelings, including being able to tell us that he loved us or understand that we loved him.

We didn't really know where to turn or what to do. We struggled with how to best help him while also being good parents to his younger sisters. We felt alone and scared for what not only his future looked like, but also ours. The turnaround came because of our persistence. My husband and I made the decision for me to become a stay-at-home mom, focusing on learning about autism, speech impairments, motor delays, and advocacy.

We have been blessed with compassionate teachers and support staff that helped guide us, along with wonderful therapists. I spent countless hours reading, going to workshops and conferences, and networking with other parents to try to find solutions for problems that have popped up along the way.

This year, as Charlie enters the fourth grade, he is continuing his fourth year of being in a gen ed. He still has a schedule full of therapy... but he also continues to make progress and improvements.

We firmly believe that we will find a way for him to continue to succeed in life and spend each day focusing on the positives of being Charlie's parents – the joy that he brings to us each day is immeasurable. His is a story of continued hope for growth and progress. He is a wonderful, smart, funny 9-year-old. To know Charlie is to adore Charlie.

That is a snapshot of our life with Charlie – our struggles in his past, our improvements in the today, and our hope for a wonderful future tomorrow. You are welcome to use any information I give to you in any way you might be able to. I just love spreading the idea that hope still exists and that hard work does pay off.

*Monica Goodvin,
Iowa City parent*

Meet Iowa's director of special education

There was a time when children with significant disabilities were warehoused in institutions. Boys and girls alike had their heads shaved. Cleaning? They were hosed down.

Standards from the 19th century? Try 1980. That's what Barb Guy saw when she first entered the profession as a special education teacher at a North Dakota institution.

"And some of those kids had not even been outside – ever," Barb recalled.

Still, those horrific images helped mold and shape Barb's future, who today is the state's special education director with the Iowa Department of Education.

Society has come a long way in the last 30 years.

"We have acknowledged the right for individuals to be educated, to live and learn and play in the neighborhoods of their choice through society's willingness to provide services," Barb said.

But that doesn't mean we are at a place where we need to be.

"Success is more than a test score, but when it comes to the achievement gap, unfortunately the only way to measure it so far is through academic testing," she said. "We want the kids to be engaged in their schools. Are they feeling successful? Research links engagement to academic success and success after high school."

To that end, the Iowa Department of Education is focusing its efforts on three main areas of special education:

- Increase effectiveness of instruction and services.
- Build collaborative partnerships, enhancing the relationship and work among the Department, Area Education Agencies, local schools and other community agencies.
- Hone procedures and structures within the Department to ensure a streamlined and consistent delivery of information and processes.

The goals' chief objectives focus on ensuring all students enter kindergarten ready to learn as well as having students proficient in reading by the end of third grade. The goals are aligned to the state Board of Education's directives and backed by Iowa's < Special Education Advisory Panel.

Barb envisions that within the next decade, the delivery of special procedural compliance emphasis to results-based education in which personalized instruction will be in place for all students – not just those on Individualized Education Programs.

"Sure, test results will be a part of that, but we will be examining other potential measures, such as the percent of students going to college or the percent of students engaged in extracurricular activities," she said.

In addition, Barb envisions a more cohesive service system for students with mental and behavior issues, as well as an extended and stronger relationship with all stakeholders to ensure the responsibility for students' education doesn't fall solely on the schools.

"We need to start with the belief that all students can succeed and it's our job to help them – and that's regardless of whether you're paid to do it or not."

At a glance: Barb Guy

State director of special education, Iowa Department of Education

Formerly a Department consultant, Transition and Work Experience

Ph.D., Special Education, University of Kansas

M.S., Education, Severe/Multiple Disabilities, University of Kansas

B.A., Mental Retardation, University of Northern Colorado

Conference nears on effective teaching practices for 21st Century

There still is time to register for an Oct. 23 conference in Des Moines aimed at effectively teaching students with disabilities.

“Reaching and Teaching 21st Century Learners with Disabilities” is being sponsored by the Iowa Council of Administrators of Special Education and the Iowa Council for Exceptional Children.

The daylong conference will include keynote speaker Ako Kambon, president of Visionary Leaders Institute, who will speak on incorporating everyday classroom strategies, as well as improving parental involvement in schools. There also will be breakout sessions focused on legal issues, secondary transition and Response to Intervention.

Cost for parents and students is \$85, which includes lunch and snacks. Members of either group pay \$110 for the conference, and nonmembers pay \$135. Deadline for registration is Oct. 9.

Use the following link to register: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1r4Yx25-7KHjYJIsGPjWeB_nfc2CfwckCOgAAQRA5j2C1/viewform