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Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Educators and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

A (big) cut above the rest

School makes huge strides in ensuring high achievement

It’s no secret that many Iowa schools struggle with getting grade-level achievement from their students on Individualized Education Programs. On average, only 32.31 percent of students with Individualized Education Programs in Iowa are proficient in reading and math. Put another way, over 67 percent fall far short of expectations.

Not so at Ankeny’s Northeast Elementary. The school’s students on IEPs are averaging 75.86 percent proficiency in reading and math. To break that down, 72.41 percent are proficient in reading, and an astounding 79.31 percent are proficient in math.

Make no mistake – Northeast Elementary is not just good. It’s excellent. And it is the best in the state when it comes to high achievement among students on IEPs. And to that end, the school is receiving the coveted Breaking Barriers Award from the State Board of Education, an award that honors schools for breaking the education gap among historically disadvantaged students.

For the faculty at Northeast, they are startled to hear they are the best. But they aren’t surprised at their children’s achievement. Principal Al Neppl says beyond having quality teachers, it is a systemic approach that enables their students to excel.



Teachers Tania Fried and Megan Jones prepare to co-teach.

“I think one of the biggest things we do is keep the kids in gen. ed.,” he said. “There is a lot of co-teaching, less pull out (of classroom). And when I talk about co-teaching, I’m not talking about a teacher in the back of the room, but an active teacher who is sharing teaching responsibilities with the general education teacher.

“One of most important pieces is engaging students on IEPs in the same content, themes and standards that their peers are a part of. It raises the students’ accountability.”

Neppl said that it is critical to have high expectations for all students. He specifically cited encouraging students on IEPs to higher reading-level groups.

But it requires collaboration.

“This would not happen without PLC (professional learning community) time and teachers who are willing to find additional time

Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

to collaborate in their day,” he said.

His teachers agree. Through PLCs and dedicated collaboration time, teachers are able to map out effective strategies for each child with the goal of exiting the students from special education.

As Teacher Richelle Jones said, “special education is a support, it is not a destination. They are not special ed. for life.”

“We have to look at it that way,” Neppl said. “If Richelle writes that 75 percent of her students are going to meet their goals, that means we are saying that 25 percent are not going to make it. That is just not right.”

Added Jones, “Our goal is to work ourselves out of a job.”

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IEP PROFICIENCY AVERAGES

Statewide	28.24% in reading	36.38% in math
Northeast Elementary, Ankeny	72.41% in reading	79.31% in math

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Ensuring students meet grade-level expectations does not occur overnight, said Teacher Tania Fried.

“Typically, if students are in special education they are anywhere from a year to five years behind,” she said. “So we create lofty goals to get them as close to their peers; we need to close that gap. It’s definitely not a quick fix – it takes two to three years to bring the student up to par. If you have those expectations, you are going to get there. If the students are aware – and they are aware, for the most part – then that is how you keep closing the gap.”

And it’s that teacher-student communication that ensures everyone is working toward the same goal, Neppl said.

“Students know they have an IEP, but it’s important to share with them what the learning target is, what it will take to get them there, and then along the way, sharing the progress,” he said.



Principal Al Neppl says keeping students with special needs in the general education classroom as much as possible is a critical component for a student’s success.



“We need to close that gap.”
Teacher Tania Fried

Involving students in their own progress makes them accountable – and complicit in their success.

“I get them involved with their progress,” Jones said. “For instance, if a student was reading at 70 words per minute last week and I point out that they are at 85 this week, they get excited. They love the progress.”

None of it could happen without a strong commitment from leadership.

“The teachers know the expectations because they have been articulated clearly,” Fried said.

“Al puts a lot of empowerment – he trusts us, and that is huge,” Jones said. “He trusts our opinion, he trusts that we know what we’re doing, he knows that we are always thinking of the kids.”

“But it isn’t blind trust,” Fried added. “He is involved, he asks questions, he genuinely wants to know about the kids and how they are doing; he is an active participant in the IEP team.”

Neppl said it’s important to create a culture of high expectations and continuous improvement.

“We cannot allow ourselves to get comfortable where the kids are at,” he said. “It might be small increments that we see the growth in, but in an el-

ementary school we see them for quite a few years. We need to always being asking ourselves: Can we do more? Can they achieve more?”

Even with the best laid plans, things don’t always go as well as hoped.

“Sometimes you feel like banging your head,” Jones said. “But that is the time to go back and look at a student’s older IEPs, and you start seeing the real progress. It changes your entire day.”

“Our goal is to work ourselves out of a job.”

Teacher Richelle Jones



Northeast’s recipe for student success

- Maintain high expectations for all students.
- Incorporate co-teaching in which teachers participate equally.
- Use same content as non-disabled peers.
- Keep students engaged in their goals, including progress monitoring.
- Set aside professional learning communities for teachers.
- Have school-wide commitment toward success for all.
- Believe that “special education” is a support, not a destination.

Co-teaching: Not what you may think

In theory, co-teaching is the practice in which two teachers – one a subject-matter expert and the other being an expert in specially designed instruction – share the same classroom.

But then there’s reality.

“Co-teaching is really all about relationships and personalities between two teachers in the classroom,” said Marietta Rives, a consultant at the Iowa Department of Education. “I have seen great examples of co-teaching where the teachers literally can finish one another’s sentences. On the flip side, I have also seen examples of a teacher standing in the back of the room waiting for when the student on an IEP needs help.”

To be sure, effective co-teaching needs to incorporate both the theoretical and reality. But effective relationships cannot be underestimated.

“I have never insisted upon having teachers co-teach,” said Al Neppl, principal of Northeast Elementary in the Ankeny school district. “You can’t force a relationship. For it to work, it starts with relationship building between the two teachers and coming to believe that co-teaching can truly work.”

Neppl’s special education teachers have successfully forged relationships with their general education peers.

“When I am a co-teacher, I am not the special education teacher but a teacher, and we work together,” said Teacher Tania Fried. “We’re very fluid with what we do in the classroom.”

Co-teaching can even unleash a bit of healthy competition, said Teacher Richelle Jones.



Department of Education Consultant Marietta Rives

“Being in a classroom makes us up our game when we are co-teaching,” she said. “In that environment, you see what the gen. ed. teachers are doing, and it makes you realize your own students need to be challenged more.”

Schedules are a particularly important part of the equation, Rives said, by ensuring teachers have time to collaborate for classes. Indeed, at Northeast Elementary, Neppl relies upon his faculty to develop their own schedules.

“They know best how to make it happen,” Neppl said.

The bottom line on co-teaching is that it can work if everyone is willing to make it work.

“Effective co-teaching is when both teachers are effectively instructing the class at the same time,” Rives said. “The average student will not be able to discern that one of the teachers is there for children with special needs. They interact seamlessly before the class, enhancing one another’s instruction.”



2014 Teacher of the Year Jane Schmidt

2014 Teacher of the Year

2014 Teacher of the year Jane Schmidt started her career teaching special education. Though today she focuses on literacy, the Maquoketa Middle School teacher is passionate about integrating students with disabilities into her classrooms.

What do you stress to both special education and general education teachers in working with students with special needs?

All general education teachers have students with special needs integrated into their classrooms. Sometimes they are integrated without assistance, sometimes an associate comes in to monitor learning, while other times the special needs teacher and the general education teacher co-teach a class. For all of this to work, communication is key. Clearly outlining expectations is necessary for a seamless transition of services between teacher and learner.

Why is integration so important for students?

Integration is key for students because we do not live in a society of separation but a society of inclusion. Integration is important to develop understanding on the part of all types of learners.

Any other words of advice?

It is important to stay up to date on the latest research and resources available to enhance the achievement of special learners. Being aware of student learning styles and helping them to develop awareness of their own learning styles will help them develop independence. As educators, we must always have the end in mind and determine what will assist this student today so s/he will have the opportunity to develop into a successful, productive citizen.