



Each and Every Child

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

In pursuit of excellence

Teachers, principal take initiative to find ways to end education gap

Do the students receive home work? Do you co-teach every day? How much time does it take coordinating planning? Does it take more time to co-teach?

It's just another day at Northeast Elementary in Ankeny. Eagle Grove Elementary wasn't the first to visit this high-performing school, and it wasn't going to be the last.

Eagle Grove, like the other schools, is seeking solutions to end the education gap that exists between students on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and their non-disabled peers. Northeast Elementary stands out because it leads the state in the percent of students with disabilities who are proficient in reading and math.

"People are always trying to make excuses why one district can do it, but it won't work in their district," said Eagle Grove Elementary Principal Mike Kruger. "My teachers and I agree: We are beyond making excuses and ready to do things differently to see what we can do for our kids. My teachers do an excellent job and we are always willing to explore other ways that might better meet our students' needs."

Kruger, accompanied by three teachers and an Area Education Agency consultant, observed classes, and had ample chances to discuss what they saw with Northeast teachers and administrators. Their curiosity was particularly focused on co-teaching.

In a fourth-grade math class, the first thing to strike the Eagle Grove teachers was how students blended in seamlessly.

"I wonder which ones are special education kids," Teacher Jen Conaway said. "They are thriving; all the kids here are engaged."

The educators were observing how the students rotated among three different circuits within the math class: One being taught by Teacher Tania Fried and another by Teacher Megan Jones. In the third leg of the circuit, students are broken down into pairs to help



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Eagle Grove Principal Mike Kruger and his special education teachers observe a co-teaching class in which students, including those with special needs, excel in math.

one another. The educators teach the same subject matter, but use different approaches with their groups to ensure all learners are comprehending. The energy and intensity in the class is palpable, the students focused.

"It's amazing to see small groups," said Eagle Grove Teacher Angie Anderson. "When you're teaching 20 students, you really have no way of knowing if everyone is understanding your lesson."

Added Kruger, "I can't tell who has an IEP – everyone is doing the same thing. They have the same expectations for everyone."

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Eagle Grove Teacher Marla Hill was impressed with the comprehensive classroom approach.

“I noticed how they incorporate I-Pads to collaborate between partners, and how they use partners as a core part of instruction,” she said. “They get to learn two different perspectives from two different teachers. The teachers interact so inconspicuously. Everyone is getting what they need. This undoubtedly is bolstering their confidence.”

Confidence – and proficiency. In a state where the average reading-and-math proficiency is 32.31 percent among children with IEPs, Northeast Elementary leads the state where children on IEPs average 75.86 percent proficiency.

“We’re like the state average,” Kruger said. “There is a huge gap between our students and students on IEPs. You have to have those honest conversations. You have to reflect on what you’re doing. You have to question everything you are doing, address what’s working and change the things that aren’t working.”

Northeast Principal Al Neppl said a school should not expect results overnight.

“It’s a slow process,” he said, adding that scheduling is perhaps the most difficult undertaking to ensure teachers’ schedules align with one another.

“Special education and gifted teachers lead the schedule here,” he said, drawing double-takes from the Eagle Grove faculty. “You have to look at what each kid needs. Meeting the needs of the kids has to drive the schedule.”

Beyond the schedule, teachers need to be willing to participate in co-teaching. Initially, there was minimal interest at Northeast.



Northeast Principal Al Neppl participates in a discussion with Eagle Grove educators.

“But lots of teachers want to now – about any of our teachers would want to participate,” Neppl said. “The change has come about because they have seen the success.”

The Northeast team dispelled the concern that the co-teaching model could adversely affect the performance of non-IEP students.

“We still focus on all students making a year’s worth of growth,” Neppl said.

“The Response to Intervention process (also known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports) also has helped,” said Northeast Teacher Megan Walsh. “In our class, there are ‘bubble kids’ whose assessment scores don’t indicate the need for special education services, but with Response to Intervention, we can do interventions and target their instruction more than prior to having just one teacher. One teacher can do it, but you can pinpoint a lot more particular needs when you have more than one teacher in the classroom. The confidence has grown and something has clicked with these students – they have taken off with it.”

“Kids in the middle have really stepped it up,” Fried said. “I’m so proud of them for making that kind of growth.”

After the visit, Kruger said he and his team were enthusiastic about what they saw.

“We walked away feeling good about what we saw,” he said. “We definitely will take some things and try to apply them here. The schedule is definitely something we are going to work on. My teachers understand the need. My entire staff feels like this could be a really good thing. Al did such a good thing – you don’t force this on people, you have to have teachers who are willing.”



Eagle Grove Teacher Marla Hill watches Northeast Teacher Tania Fried teach division to a small group of fourth graders.



On the other side of the classroom, Northeast Teacher Megan Jones teaches a different small group. Students rotate every 18 minutes – they receive instruction from both teachers, and then pair up to work together. Teachers use the same material, but differentiate their instruction to ensure everyone is comprehending.

Q-and-A

Do the students receive home work? Yes, everyone does. They have been in the habit of receiving homework since kindergarten.

How much time does it take coordinating planning? We set aside about 40 minutes each week, but it isn't enough. It's often more than an hour, but frequently twice a week. It is time consuming since you have to differentiate with two teachers.

Do you co-teach every day? Yes.

Does co-teaching take more time? It's more about our pacing: What is the goal for today's lesson? And then we create the lesson accordingly. Perhaps we don't use all 12 problems, but take one to model, two to do in pairs, three to work on. It really comes down to this: If assessments show the students have mastered something, why do all the problems when you could otherwise use that time for enrichment?

How has it changed the way you write an IEP? We now write co-teaching into the IEP and list the specific standards.



Eagle Grove Teacher Angie Anderson and Principal Mike Kruger observe co-teaching in practice at North-east Elementary in Ankeny. Anderson was especially impressed with the rotation of students among the two teachers.

In addition to receiving instruction in small groups from both teachers, students pair off to work division problems on their I-Pads. Class observers notice how down-to-business students are during the class, in which students remain engaged during the entire class period.

