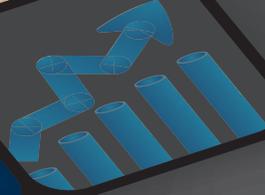




Each and Every Child

Whatever it Takes to Grow Learning
WMS!
Winterset Middle School: proficient and advanced proficient students are expected results at baseline



Volume 5, Issue 7

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

Following the leader(s)

Middle school adopts other schools' best practices and gets great results

If it's true that imitation is the best form of flattery, Wendy Sawyer has been giving a lot of compliments to other schools in the past couple years. That's because she and her team have visited other schools doing great things and replicated them at her middle school in Winterset.

And they are already seeing positive results, said Sawyer, the principal of Winterset Middle School.

Winterset Middle School is streamlining supports so that even the most needy learners become proficient. Consider this: Most students in special education

at the fourth-through-sixth grade middle school exceeded expected growth last year.

Sawyer said Winterset's newfound success is thanks to implementing three initiatives: focusing on core skills, co-teaching and scheduling.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

General education teacher Kevin Oswald, left, said there is a new mindset among educators at school.

"After we read about Northeast Elementary's work, we had to go visit them," said Julie Mitchell, a fifth grade special education teacher who was referring to the work outlined in a previous article on the success of an Ankeny school.

"First thing we learned talking with teachers and administrators is that when it comes to scheduling special education, the schedule is built around special education. Wendy liked that and changed it here."

And what did the general education teachers think?

Continued on next page

"I kind of compare it to a big jigsaw puzzle," said Kevin Oswald, a fifth grade general education teacher who now collaborates with special education teachers. "We have to ask ourselves what's best for the kids. If a student needs something, I need to be accommodating to it."

"It helps us make sure the kids get more instructional time in their areas of need," Mitchell added. "I have been in a position where I had to work the times in around the gen. ed. I don't think enabling special education to schedule first has been all that difficult."

But it makes scheduling that much harder.

"If they are going to be co-teaching, scheduling becomes very tricky to make it work," Sawyer said.

Co-teaching was a challenge unto itself. Ideally, co-teachers are absolute equals in the education of the students. But they found that doesn't always work.

"We got word they were struggling to have the special education teacher truly contribute to the classroom instruction," said Kendra Alexander, the district's prek-12 instructional coach for special education – and daughter of Principal Sawyer. "I had experience in co-teaching, so we observed the general and special education teachers (in action), modeled what it could look like, planned weekly, used data and even did a video. As the general education teacher looked at the video, she kept saying, 'I'm talking too much.' We learned that the best co-teaching is when each teacher contributes to the instruction and supports all of the learners."

The benefits of co-teaching, educators

agree, are many.

"I think the kids with special needs realize that they can do the same things as everyone else does," said Alex Holbach, the fourth grade special education teacher. "They met the expectations of all the other kids."

For Mitchell, co-teaching has been a game changer.

"This is a tremendous difference," she said. "We use to do pull out because we thought that was best for the kids. We thought working one-on-one was the only way to close that gap. By being in the core gen. ed. classroom for core and working on core-plus-more in special education, we have found that this is a far better way to fill in the gaps to raise them above proficiency."

And this all resulted in a substantial paradigm shift at the school.

"From my experience, there was a shift in all teachers taking ownership

in the learning of all students," says Oswald. "That shift in mindset made a big difference."

Holbach said she's observed how all students benefit, not just those in special education.

"In reading, my co-teacher would teach half, and I would teach half," she said. "It really benefited all the kids. By having two teachers in there, the kids felt they were getting twice as much attention. And they were."

"It really enhances the education experience having the general education teachers realize they are critical to everyone's success," said Kathy Eighmy, the sixth grade special education teacher.

Jenn Drake, the Level III special education teacher, said her students benefit tremendously.

"My students now do group reading with their peers," she said. "And they attend science class. If something is



Special education teacher Julie Mitchell, center, says co-teaching has been a real game changer.

too difficult, they will come to me. But they do everything with their classmates, such as having to present a science project in class. To be honest, just how much these kids could learn really surprised me. When the general education teacher sees what they can do, the teachers work that much harder.”

Sawyer said that much of the work the school is doing today goes back several years. Working on professional development with Shannon Harken from Heartland Area Education Agency, teachers have been working to engage students.

“For instance, instead of raising your hand and one student answering a question, now everyone is expected to answer,” she said. “It might be discussed with an elbow partner or written on a white board. Everyone is expected to be a learner and do the work of a learner.”

And finally, the school has what is called Whatever I Need (WIN) groups. These are based on the skills students are expected to know in each grade level. Every student, advanced, on grade level or below grade level, is assigned to a small group, every day for 25 minutes. All student are checked regularly to see if their group is a right match for their learning needs. If they excel, they move on to more demanding work. If they don’t, staff checks to see what more the students need.

“The groups are formed using data and placed by gen. ed. and special education teachers,” Sawyer said. “In our PLC teams (Professional Learning Communities), the WIN groups are tightly aligned for students in terms of building core skills. The teachers create assessments and check often to see who is getting it and who is not.”

Andy Pickering, the instructional coach for the middle school, said the groups are color coded – red denoting a child needs more help, yellow denoting progress but not yet meeting grade level standards and green denoting the child is at grade level or beyond.

The data is shared with students so they know where they are. This has been a motivator for kids to work hard to move to the next level. And that has resulted in students engaged in their learning progress.

“The students know that the goal is green for everyone,” Alexander said. “We had a student in special education who, when she realized she worked hard and moved into the green group, started crying for joy.”

Imitation. At its very best.



The special education team at Winterset Middle School is enthusiastic with the progress they have seen.