



Each and Every Child

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From good to great

Pair a great teacher with some good interventions and...look out!

Leiah Craun was worried.

Her new third-grade student was testing two years behind in math. It was even worse in literacy: The child was

testing at preschool level.

"Honestly, this scared me," Craun said. "Here she was sitting in a third grade classroom, and wasn't completely

fluent in naming alphabet letters. I was worried about the frustration she felt in a classroom. I was worried if we could catch up.

"I thought, 'we have our work cut out for us.'"

It's not like Craun scares easily. In the last three years since her Marshalltown school district introduced a comprehensive intervention model, this veteran special education teacher only had one student who hasn't made at least a year-and-a-half worth of progress. ("And we're still trying to figure out what's going on with that student," Craun said.)

Equally scared were the student's parents, Sandy and Todd Dale.

"We knew that she struggled," said Sandy Dale, who herself is a special education teacher at Marshalltown's high school. "In class, she knew she had different spelling words. She knew



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Teacher Leiah Craun shows Kasia Dale how to assess a book's content before judging whether she will enjoy it.

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that she wasn't doing the same work as everyone else. School wasn't her favorite place to be."

The Dales had despaired since kindergarten.

"We were uneasy with the advice we were receiving from her teachers," Sandy Dale said. "Still, I don't believe in telling someone else how to do their job. I am not an elementary teacher."

But that was before their daughter, Kasia, transferred into the Marshalltown school district and, in particular, Franklin Elementary. In one semester – one – Craun had advanced Kasia by an astonishing two years. And by sometime next year, Craun expects to exit Kasia from special education altogether.

Don't look for a silver bullet in the Marshalltown district. Instead, educators are receiving professional development on four comprehensive literacy interventions, developed by Linda Dorn and Carla Soffos, said Penny Duer, the district's at-risk coordinator.

"The interventions each have their own characteristics," Duer said. "The interventions are flexible and can be mixed and matched to meet a variety of student needs."

Still, the interventions alone don't guarantee success.

"You can have the best programs in the world," Duer said. "But unless you have a teacher who is responsive with kids and implements the interventions with fidelity, it's not going to work. It never really is the program – it's always the teacher. And that is Mrs. Craun."

Craun's usual unwavering confidence in her ability to educate students was seriously challenged when Duer



Matt Cretsinger, director of special services, sits with Franklin Principal Tim Holmgren.

Leiah Craun talks about her learning curve while At-risk Coordinator Penny Duer looks on.



Sandy and Todd Dale are thrilled with their daughter's progress.

was training her in the interventions. One key aspect of an intervention is observing a student make mistakes as a means of thoroughly diagnosing the child's problems.

"As special education teachers, we have seen ourselves as rescuers," Craun said. "The temptation is to dive in and help a student right away. When I was being trained in the new interventions, Penny was observing me work with a student who was reading. When she came to a word she couldn't figure out, I was supposed to stay quiet. The student started looking at me, pleading in

her eyes. I wanted to start asking her questions to help her along. But Penny could see what I was thinking and said, 'nope, don't say anything.' It was very hard watching that student struggle, but she finally figured it out. It was that very day that I thought, 'aha! I get it.'

"It is such a shift. Now I want to see the kids make mistakes and struggle, because that's when I get to my next teaching point."

Beyond the interventions, Craun says it's important that content used in pull out parallels the work done in the general

education classes.

"It is critical to align her work to what is going on in gen. ed. to back it up," she said. "If it is something different, that's too much noise in her head. I am aligning my work with the classroom and the core standards."

And, of course, there is engagement. Craun has her students choose which books they want to read – and in which order – based on their own interest.

As for the Dales, it's an understatement to say they appreciate what Craun has done for their daughter. And Sandy Dale says Craun's success has made her reflect upon her own practices.

"I am a little envious," she said. "I have been thinking, 'I am going to find out the techniques and bring them to the high schoolers.' This has totally transformed me."

As for Kasia, she now loves school.

"I like school because it is fun," she said. "Because you can write and read. It is fun to write stories."

The four interventions

1 Interactive Writing

is intended for students operating in the emergent and beginning early stages of reading and writing, and it focuses on concepts of print, phonemic awareness, and alphabetic principle.

2 Guided Reading Plus,

intended for students operating primarily in the early stages of reading and writing development, focuses on processing and making meaning of text.

3 Writing Aloud

can be utilized with students in the late early and transitional stages of reading and writing. When gaps between a student's reading and writing behaviors exist, this intervention is considered, and it helps students see how an author intentionally provides support for the readers.

4 Comprehension Focus

is utilized at transitional and fluent stages of reading and writing. As the name of the intervention suggests, it supports students with thinking at deeper levels about what they are reading and writing.



***Maquoketa Educator
Jane Schmidt debuts her blog***

VOICE FROM THE FIELD

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