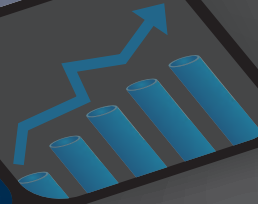




# Each and Every Child



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## Nothing short of great

*School syncs many moving parts for top-notch results*

CEDAR FALLS – The teachers at Cedar Falls’ Hansen Elementary School like to say they think outside the box. But it’s an understatement, akin to saying that George Washington was somewhat important.

For the Hansen team – from special education to general education, from principal to the district – creates an environment in which students are learning. So much so, in fact, that Hansen Elementary leads the state

in education delivery for students on Individualized Education Programs.

Consider: 79 percent of the Hansen students on IEPs are proficient in reading and math. That compares to 35 percent statewide – making Hansen the best in the state.

What’s going on? Could it be that special education gets to schedule classes first? Absolutely. Or that the mindset is that students on IEPs are first and foremost general education students? Yes. Strong collaboration? You bet. The school’s co-teaching practices? Sure. The leadership? Unequivocally.

Hansen’s success is indeed the whole of all its parts. And that makes for a well-tuned team, a top-drawer work environment and excelled learning.

What makes Hansen so unique, said 267 Area Education Agency Courtney Owen and the school’s AEA



Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

*Special Education Teacher Stephanie Murch works on mathematics with a couple students.*

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# Hansen Elementary School

P

Positive  
and  
Accountable

R

Ready  
to  
Learn

I

Insist on  
My Personal  
Best

D

Dependable  
and  
Respectful

E

Encourage  
Others to do  
the Right Thing

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representative, is that everything aligned at just the right time.

"It's novel because everything is working right just at the same time," Owen said. "And when that happens, you can get some really cool things to happen."

Through Hansen Elementary's history, it has been known for always having strong leadership. But when Principal Tara Estep walked through the doors seven years ago, she upped the ante.

"Tara's leadership is a huge factor in Hansen's outcomes," said Jill White, the district's student services coordinator. "She has taken her team to new heights. This building is a model building."

The team agrees.

"Tara is very accepting of us trying new things," said 23-year Hansen veteran Barb Rogers, a sixth grade special education teacher. "The environment has changed considerably since Tara came. We have a new philosophy about our kids. We have co-teaching. There's a culture that breeds positivity and acceptance. I love my team, I love my coworkers. And I don't think most kids know that our kids are in special education today. Everyone knew 23 years ago."

Estep bristles at accolades. It's her team, she would say, that does the heavy lifting. But there's no question that Estep is the architect and ringleader. It started when the school staff created a vision which, boiled down, focuses on delivering unparalleled education to all students. In order for that vision to take root, however, mindsets needed to be channeled.

"We focus on collective efficacy," Estep said. "Do I believe I can truly make an impact on the kids?" "Do I believe my



*Principal Tara Estep*

colleagues can do it?' 'Do I believe they can impact student achievement?' If we start being skeptical of one another, that's when we start working in silos and closing our doors. We truly live our vision of educating all our kids."

The kids do, as well.

"We developed a student belief statement that came from our vision statement," Estep said. "We made it student friendly so that they could own it."

Some might find it difficult to get everyone on board. Not Estep.

"Here's the deal," she said. "You come into this building, and this is what we are. You are on the boat with us, and if you are not, you will want to be."

"I want to be the kind of leader who people want to follow. I want our teachers to be leaders in the district so others want to follow them. That way, they can build the same vision, the same communities in their own classrooms."

Estep says embracing a positive culture is key.

"If we aren't having fun, the kids are not having fun," she said. "So it starts as joy

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among us, and it gets to the students.”

Students on IEPs thrive because the faculty and staff have a mindset that all students can learn at high levels.

“Specifically what we are doing with students on IEPs is no different than what we do for other students,” Estep said. “Our framework provides us with skill-by-skill student focus. We ensure that kids are at their just-right level for reading. Our interventions in general education are focused so that we prevent many students from entering special education. And as a result, we are decreasing the number of students in special education.”



*Jill White*



*Courtney Owen*



*Renee Fober*



*Stephanie Murch*



*Katie Reed*



*Barb Rogers*

This fall, only 9 percent of Hansen students are on IEPs.

Teachers regularly use formative assessments, which enables them to quickly check learning and to see if their instruction is meeting student needs.

“If the child isn’t doing well, maybe the teacher needs to reteach or intervene,” Estep said. “If the child is going up and beyond, then the child needs enrichment.”

Every Wednesday, teachers – general and special – meet to review data of every single student.

“The special education interventions could not work out without our gen. ed. partners,” said the district’s White. “If we didn’t have our gen. ed. partners agreeing to do it with us, then it would be all for naught. Here, the gen. ed. teachers say, ‘What can we do to help?’”

“What has made these students successful and confident in the general education setting and at school has to do with the collaboration between their general education teacher and I,” said Stephanie Murch, the kindergarten-through-second grade special education teacher. “We make

sure that these students are given exactly what the other students in their classrooms are given. If a blue sheet is sent home for homework to their peers, then the general education teacher lets me know and we send home a blue sheet that is at their level. The general education teacher invites me into the classroom when they are sharing reading and during learning activities that we do not want the boys to miss. If I feel part of the classroom, I know my students do as well.”

That isn’t to say that pulling students out for small-group work is passe.

“Last year this group was pushed into the classroom for math because we thought co-teaching was the ultimate goal,” Murch said. “The students were not successful and were showing behaviors. As a school and IEP team, we decided that this is not what was best for them. We always do what is best for the kids. I now pull them into my classroom for math. All of the materials are now at their level, they feel success, and it has built their confidence tremendously. I now teach them at their level and their grade level material but it is all at their pace. This allows them to be exposed to grade-level material and to fill the gaps.”

Early planning is another component to Hansen’s success.

“We start in the spring making plans in the classroom for the following fall,” said teacher Rogers. “We even determine which paras will be good fits for each student.”

“Definitely within the last three years we have gotten progressively better at frontloading,” said Renee Fober, fourth grade special education teacher. “In May, we come up with reading and writing goals together. Especially in writing, students learn so much from

their peers. You cannot recreate this in an isolated environment. You get ideas from peers. It makes everyone feel successful. If they learn to believe in themselves, then they can believe they can do anything. That closes the gap right there."



Special Education Teacher Renee Fober, working with a student here, says her paraeducators are critical to the school's success.

The school's paraeducators, she added, are as much a part of the team as are the teachers.

"Paras are hugely supportive of our kids in the classroom," she said. "We could not do it without them."

The team's newest member, Level II Strategist Katie Reed, started this fall at Hansen after moving from Texas.

"They are accepting of new ideas," Reed said. "And gen. ed. teachers believe it isn't a bad thing to have a special education student in your classroom. It is welcome here. It was a pleasant surprise. Actually, it still blows me away."

In her former school, Reed said she wanted to collaborate with others.

"But we didn't feel like we had enough time," she said. "Even though co-teaching looks like it may be more work, it isn't. Everyone is there for the end goal. And I don't have to recreate a thing: If someone has a great lesson, I can borrow it. It's a lot more efficient."

Reed's former school also was big on exams.

"We had big exams every six weeks, getting ready for the annual assessment," she said.

At Hansen? No.

"If you are offering quality instruction and providing a strong, positive environment, there's no need for prepping for the test," Principal Estep said.

## 'It's time to step up our game'

Compared to 50 year ago, the United States has made huge strides in the delivery of special education. Inclusion has become more than the norm in the classroom. Educators have more evidence-based tools at their fingertips than any time before.

Yet the achievement gap between students with disabilities and those without remains high.

Don't tell Dr. Frances Stetson that is to be expected since, after all, they have disabilities. Stetson, the keynote speaker at the Iowa Council of Administrators of Special Education fall conference in Des Moines, said most students with Individualized Education Programs do not have significant cognitive disabilities.

"Any student can astound us with what they can learn when we expect higher achievement," Stetson said.

Stetson, who heads the internationally known Stetson and Associates, challenges mindsets and methods, paradigms and practices. She often asks more questions than gives answers – pushing listeners to dig down deep into themselves.

"For a long time, we were happy that students with disabilities were finally in the general education classroom," she said. "We gave ourselves a big gold star. That's very important, of course, since the more inclusive we are the more opportunities students with disabilities have to learn grade-level content."

But research and evidence show that isn't enough. Examining what is being done in the classroom – what is really

## TOOLS OF HANSEN'S TRADE

- ✂ Co-teach whenever possible
- ✂ Regular formative assessments
- ✂ Work toward collective efficacy
- ✂ Review data each week of all kids
- ✂ Staff-created vision statement
- ✂ "Our" children, not "their" kids
- ✂ Early planning (spring for fall)
- ✂ Special ed. leads way in scheduling
- ✂ Paras are critical to success

happening, not one's perception of what's happening – takes a lot of honest, self reflection. Often, simply changing the style of teaching will earn huge dividends.

"Many of our classrooms, particularly high schools, are still focused on lecture-based instruction – the teacher in front," she said. "We also see a lot of solitary learning rather than highly effective and engaging collaborative learning. It is a powerful strategy. It doesn't mean we always use small groups, but we vary the methods of instruction so that it doesn't advantage one child over the other.

"One of the things that benefits every child is differentiated instruction, such as activity-based learning, project-based learning. If we improve the academic level of our work, it benefits all students."

There also has to be a sea change in philosophy.

"Do you think of all students as your kids, or are some kids 'the special education' kids?" Stetson said.

"Everyone should embrace all students

because it really makes a difference. I believe one day soon we will have a more seamless system of supports."

While there are plenty of great evidence- and research-based strategies available, how do you know your strategies are the best for the individual students?

"We have put a lot of structures in place, but we need to improve upon them," she said. "An example would be collaborative or co-teaching: Only use it when it's appropriate. Individualize it for all students. But when we do use co-teaching, we need to sharpen the roles of the two adults in the classroom, and then reflect on what we are doing and why we are doing it."

Though there are plenty of effective strategies, Stetson suggests the heavy lifting has yet to be completed.

"We have made a lot of progress, but perhaps some of the most difficult work is yet to be done," Stetson said. "It's not just a matter of learning the strategies and using them, it's also a matter of personal work toward



*Dr. Frances Stetson*

equity and access, and personal reflection. Then we reach more children and engage every child in the classroom. We have to examine our strategies, and look inward and say, 'what old paradigms do I still hold and need to get rid of so that I can reach all children?'"

Stetson remains optimistic about closing the education gap.

"I believe that we are coming closer and closer to it," she said "The law says we should start with the general education classroom in mind. I believe we are realizing a lot of the strategies work with all learners. In other words, we have made good progress for all students.

"If we look at what we're doing and seek continuous improvement, then we can do a great deal more with the research in place. I honestly think educators are working harder – it is harder work in education than ever before. Celebrate what you have done."

Stetson cautions to not take on too much at once.

"Don't take on the world, take on two or three strategies that will make a difference in the children's education. Then add two more. We must nurture our teachers as well as our students."

## Things to consider:

1. Shared ownership of all students is not negotiable.
2. Curriculum aligned materials
3. Pre-assess before instruction
4. Accelerated vs. remedial strategies
5. Scaffolding and use of instructional accommodations for all
6. Differentiated instruction
7. Student engagement
8. Flexible grouping
9. Positive behavioral supports and effective classroom management
10. Continuum of supports
11. Inclusive education practices
12. High expectations
13. Cultural proficiency and authentic relationships
14. Student self-efficacy
15. Effective in-class supports
16. Specialized supports meet highest standards
17. Effective and appropriate paraeducator support
18. Coaching
19. Collaborative planning time
20. Smooth transitions from level to level