



Each and Every Child



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The best of the best

When the lines begin to blur between special and gen. ed. teachers, good things happen

GILBERT – You’d be hard pressed to pin down just one thing Gilbert Intermediate School is doing right. That’s because the school is doing,

well, basically everything just right.

And that means students – *all* students – are achieving. Indeed, 79

percent of students on Individual Education Programs are proficient in math and reading, compared to a statewide average of 35 percent. In fact, Gilbert Intermediate outperformed every other school in Iowa when it comes to educating students on IEPs; three years’ worth of data were used to determine this.

Could it be the school’s daily 30-minute extended teaching or enhancement? Or a culture in which a teacher is encouraged to say she needs help on interventions? Or the professional learning communities (PLC) that have at least one special education teacher on it? Or even the school’s motto: Every student, every day?

How about “all of the above”? For Gilbert Intermediate mixes ideology with evidence-based practices. It indoctrinates all new teachers to the school with a never-say-die mindset.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

General education teacher Kristy Danilson rolls up her sleeves to ensure high academic success among all students.

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“Every student every day is truly the mentality of every staff member in this building,” said Principal Amy Griffin. “The expectations for students on IEPs are no different than our gen. ed. students.”

“When we say we want to move kids forward, we know who they are,” said the district’s curriculum director Carrie Clark. “We are talking about specific strategies that we can use so that all kids have access to our curriculum. When Amy is doing their schedule, they look at pull-out time so they don’t miss critical time in the classroom.”

“Districtwide, we have Tiger Time, where all kids go somewhere 30 minutes each day based on their need,” Griffin said. “The Tiger Time groups are formed during our PLCs. Teachers look at testing data and classroom assessments to determine what each individual student needs. The Tiger Time groups are flexible. We may see a student needs work in fluency, then after 10 days they might not need that anymore, and we move them to where they need to go next. It’s empowering to our kids because they know if they achieve something, they will move forward.”

“Teachers have bought into it because they find value in spending time with four to six students rather than when you have a full class.”

During Tiger Time, it’s all hands on deck.

“We look at our paras and teachers and consider who our resources are and how we can use them,” she said. “We are not doing new learning during Tiger Time. It’s meant to either catch up or enhance a student’s education.”

Clark said the same terminology is embedded in all teachers during research-based interventions so that from grade to grade, students will hear the same terms.

Collaboration is key to the school’s success.

“We have a special education teacher on each PLC,” Griffin said. “There’s a lot of talk about how we can



Principal Amy Griffin makes sure pull-out time doesn’t coincide with core instruction.

get these students ready for core instruction. We work on pre-teaching before the students come to that part in the classroom.”

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Principal Amy Griffin



Carrie Clark

Professional development for the teachers frequently is focused on increasing student engagement. The school also incorporates project-based learning in which students get to choose what they study.

“Why are we not offering a student a voice and choice in every lesson?” Griffin said. “Incorporating this strategy has brought in a lot of students who had been turned off to



Sarah Osborn

learning. A fifth grader will say, 'you mean I get to choose what I learn?' They are learning and they don't even know it!"

Gilbert Intermediate also works on creating a culture in which teachers are encouraged to cross-pollinate ideas and to ask for help when they are stumped.

"There's an emphasis on speaking up, like 'hey give me ideas on what you have done in your classroom,'" Clark said. "We often need a fresh set of eyes and ears on a case. We have implemented a system where teachers are encouraged to drop

in another classroom – we are talking popping in for 10 minutes to see what other teachers are doing. We are getting to a point where we are comfortable opening our classroom doors. For years, teaching had been a solitary profession. I have been so impressed with how welcoming the teachers are here when you come into their classrooms."

Griffin says the every-student-every-day motto is entrenched in their work.

"Some schools set goals of having 80 percent of their students proficient," she said. "But we want 100 percent of our students proficient. When we are looking at district data, you're not going to hear a teacher say, 'oh but we don't mean that for Johnnie or Suzy.' If someone did say that, they would be called out by her peers."

The enthusiasm expressed by the school's administrators is only surpassed by its teachers.

"I meet with the gen. ed. teachers

weekly," said Sarah Osborn, a special education teacher. "We talk about the week's plan and how we can support one another."

"We spend a lot of time planning together," said general education teacher Kristy Danilson. "The special education teacher will modify the assignments to meet the students' needs. We are parallel teaching and sometimes break into groups."

During Tiger Time, Danilson and special education teacher Kim Petersen like to joke that they get into a tug of war over students they want to work with.

"If a student is low in math and reading, we fight over who gets to that student first," said Petersen, who also is a math teacher.

"There is so much ownership over the students and getting them to where they need to be," Danilson said.

Danilson recalled going through training last year for Path to Reading Excellence in School Sites (PRESS), which is an effective research-based literacy intervention and monitoring system.



Students work on an assignment at Gilbert Intermediate.



Kristy Danilson



Kim Petersen



It's all hands on deck during Tiger Time, a 30-minute daily extended learning or enhancement time. General education teachers work alongside their special education coworkers to bring every student along.

"I didn't go with a great mindset because I wasn't impressed with the FAST information we were given," she said. "But the training was fantastic, and we implemented reading and fluency-building. Once we implemented those into Tiger Time, we saw growth in kids that we hadn't seen growth in a long time."

And with all of the talk of Tiger Time, small groups, strategies and PLCs, one can readily see how the lines begin to blur as to who is a special education teacher and who is not.

"The ownership of our students has definitely changed," Petersen said. "All of the students are all of our kids. The gen. ed. teachers know the IEPs, they know the modifications."

Osborn said personalizing expectations among the students is important.

"The students know the expectations," she said. "I will pick a skill to work on, such as mistakes. The students would get very frustrated when they would make a mistake. So I give them coping strategies."

They also model the behavior they are trying to teach.

"I find you have to be honest with the kids, be very transparent," Danilson said. "For instance, yesterday's lesson failed – it was a disaster from the beginning of the day to the end. So I told them today, 'We will try something a bit different today.' The kids see you acknowledging that you are human and that it's OK to fail."

Indeed. Every Student Every Day.

We now have a Twitter hashtag to represent the work being done with special education in Iowa. It's, you guessed it, #IowaIEP. Thanks to Iowa Falls's Ben Jass for inspiring it!

A tip from a teacher

"Schedule a regular time to collaborate with teachers and paraeducators in the special education department. This is an opportunity to highlight things that are going well in classrooms, to share strategies and resources, to explore research-based interventions, or to analyze data to make instructional decisions."



Teacher Leader Heather Howland, Janesville CSD

Include general education teacher in the IEP process

All students receiving special education services are general education students first. The involvement of the general education teacher is essential for ensuring each child's educational experience is a success.

Ways to ensure meaningful general education teacher participation:

Confirm that a general education teacher with knowledge of the student's areas of need is able to attend the meeting.

General education teachers should be encouraged to –
Share:

- Student's participation in general education curriculum/ environment
- Student's progress/current performance in general education and district wide assessments
- Student work samples when appropriate

Assist in:

- Developing positive behavioral strategies
- Developing instructional strategies
- Developing and providing accommodations within the general education classroom

Identify:

- Supports general education teachers need to assist in implementing the IEP

Courtesy Keystone AEA

Growth mindsets strengthen teachers – and students

A growth mindset strengthens the recent direction of special education "away from taking care of those with exceptionalities to now expecting those with exceptionalities to learn and make advancements in their lives and communities. The question is no longer 'whether students can learn, but how much they can learn, and with what types of instruction and support.'"

A growth mindset challenges all educators — teachers and school administrators alike — to do the following:

- Become part of a professional learning team that values constructive reflection more than criticism.
- Encourage risk and celebrate success for others.
- Take risks and risk failure.
- Treat setbacks as valuable and informative pieces of the learning process—not failures.
- Be humble.
- Embrace everyone's need to improve, including your own.
- Realize that there is no strict timeline for excellence—for any thing or any person.

Courtesy California Department of Education's The Special EDge

Have a tidbit you'd like to share? Send to jim.flansburg@iowa.gov.