



Each and Every Child



An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

One teacher’s journey from STEM to SpEd

Industrial technology educator gets hooked on inclusion, helping find passions

IOWA FALLS – Ben Jass was a top-notch industrial technology high school teacher. After all, he had won the Iowa STEM Award in north central Iowa.

But even a celebrated educator occasionally has to generate interest in his classes. So, in his spare time, he started going to Brian Foster’s special education classes in the Nashua-

Plainfield Community School District. And something funny happened along the way: Jass became hooked on special education.

“It all started when I wanted to fill my industrial tech classes,” Jass said.

“Ben would come down to my room during his planning period and would participate in our social skills activities,” Foster said. “Through this relationship-building process my students started to take positive risks to attend his classes. This allowed Ben an opportunity to grow his program while also growing the skill sets of the kids I serve.”

There was Abbie, who was learning about auto maintenance.

“Brian told me that Abbie said to him, ‘The reason I took Mr. Jass’s class is that he wouldn’t let anyone make



Photos by Iowa Department of Education’s Deborah Darge

Teacher Ben Jass says building relationships are key.

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fun of me,” Jass said. “It is important for those kids to get out of the self-contained classroom and learn, ‘I can be successful anywhere with supports.’ Brian trusted me, and I trusted him in telling me what the kids needed.”

And he learned something along the way.

“Relationships are the key,” Jass said. “You can’t teach content until you have a relationship.”

His newfound passion moved with him to the Webster City Community School District where once again, the industrial tech teacher sought out the special education teacher.

“Ben was the first teacher who I did this with and it really opened my eyes up to what things could be like in a school,” said Webster City Teacher Amanda Nichols. “Not every gen. ed. teacher is so outgoing as Ben in terms



Jass encourages a student to contemplate his favorite music, and put his thoughts to words.

of offering to team up with SpEd teachers.

“I have now begun to try to spread that relationship out to other elective teachers in the district. I am always thrilled to work and collaborate with other teachers in the building. I think in doing so, we’ve changed the culture of the school.”

During his tenure at Webster City, Jass recalled a 21-year-old Level III student named

Nathan.

“He had never been in a gen. ed. class before, except physical education,” he said. “We got him into a metal fabrication class with a paraeducator, and he gets into it!”

In fact, Nathan’s work became so impressive that he called a friend in manufacturing asking if Nathan could job shadow.

“I said ‘Nate is graduating and he needs something to be successful,’” Jass said. “So he worked a couple of hours a week for my friend.”

As graduation neared, Jass’s friend surprised him.

“He said, ‘I’m going to hire Nate,’” Jass said. “Today Nate works 20 hours a week, lives on his own, and gets around town by bike. How did we get there? By taking that gen. ed. course. For Nate, it was metal fabrication, for another kid it could be family



Jass used to reach out to special education teachers; today, he reaches out to gen. ed. teachers.

consumer science or whatever.”

Jass said it was Nashua-Plainfield’s Foster who ignited his passion.

I didn’t change overnight – it takes time. But when you see that light go off in a student’s eyes, that’s the beauty of it all.”

“My ‘a-ha’ moment was working with Brian,” he said. “I saw him take students who some thought were hopeless and he taught them to communicate, how to read.”

That magic was not lost on Jass. In fact, today he’s a special education teacher in the Iowa Falls-Alden Community School District.

“Right now I’m co-teaching three English classes,” he said. “They are not her kids and my kids – they are our kids.”

This model of teaching and mindset raises everyone’s boats.

“All the students are better for the experience, both socially and academically,” Jass said. “Everyone can learn beyond expectations if you ignite their passions.”

And if passion leads to success, it’s Jass’s passion to help students find their’s.

“Our job at the high school level is

to help students to realize that high school is not a game, but a road to developing passions,” he said. “How do we provide the opportunities to students through the curriculum?

Once we find the area that they are passionate about, I think, ‘what do I need to get there?’

“Once you find those passions, students are more interested in doing their own research, developing problem-solving skills. Get them to think, ‘if I make a mistake, how do I fix it?’”

That gives birth to deeper-level thinking, which is in line with Iowa’s academic standards and 21st century skills.

In a recent class, Jass’s charges were studying their favorite contemporary songs.

“Today we are were talking about music,” he said. “What are the words saying to you, why is this important to you? Talk to me about how this makes

you feel. This makes them read, write, and contemplate. This is daily oral language using their own work that they are passionate about.”

Jass strongly encourages both general education and special education teachers to reach out to one another.

“As a gen. ed teacher, sometimes it is scary, right?” he said. “We are not trained to know how to teach those kids.

“But get out of your classroom anyway – don’t be afraid to try new things. It is very easy to be locked into your computer, taking care of the to-do list. Instead, get out of that classroom, see how students interact with other teachers. When I started doing it, I frequently thought, ‘what’s going on here?’ I got out of my industrial tech class and visited other classrooms. I was seeing students being successful. I didn’t change overnight – it takes time. But when you see that light go off in a student’s eyes, that’s the beauty of it all.”



A student explains to Jass what a particular song means to her.

Does this IEP pass the stranger test?

When writing IEPs, it is important that the “stranger” – parents, teachers, and all others involved – clearly understands the student’s needs, goals, and services. When determining if the IEP will pass the stranger test, consider:

- Are needs explained clearly and objectively so that a person unfamiliar with a student could understand without difficulty or misconception?
- Are goals measurable and have progress monitoring procedures been clearly explained?
- Are services and supports described in detail?
- Have acronyms been avoided?

Below is an example of a service that **does not** pass the stranger test.

- Student will receive small group reading services with a special education teacher.

Below is an example of a service that **would** pass the stranger test.

- Student will receive small group reading instruction with a special education teacher focused on reading comprehension strategies. Specific strategies taught include vocabulary analysis, summarization, and understanding text structures.

Courtesy Keystone AEA

Tapping that potential

Explicit messages about talent and intelligence can lead students to develop an “on” or “off” attitude toward their own potential, such as you’re either smart and talented or you’re not. Instead of saying to a student “you’re smart,” parents and teachers should instead say,

- You really tried hard on that.
- You never gave up, even when it was difficult.
- You have such a positive attitude.
- You have really improved on...
- What a creative solution to that problem!
- You figured that out!
- You are not afraid of a challenge; that’s a powerful quality!

Excerpted from the California Department of Education’s The Edge.

Just because we want you here:

NEXT YEAR’S SPECIAL EDUCATION
SYMPOSIUM



will be held **June 11-12, 2018**

Save the date!

Save the date!

The Iowa Department of Education will be holding a special education symposium June 11 and 12. Put it on your calendar and make plans to attend! Details will come later.

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