

Opening New Doors



How three special education programs are making a difference for students and their communities

Shelby Anderson

School districts across the state are doing great work in providing opportunities for students with special needs. In this month's issue of *Wisconsin School News* we feature examples of the positive ways our state's public schools are changing the lives of students and their communities.

Peer Buddies in Oshkosh

At Merrill Middle School in the Oshkosh Area School District, Principal Cindy Olson and Special Education Teacher Paul Smith share a philosophy that students with disabilities need to be involved in every aspect of the school. This includes participating in classes with their peers and building relationships with students and staff.

This year, Olson and Smith started the "Peer Buddies" program in which students volunteer to have lunch with students with disabilities. Smith said the program, which they've only been doing since the start of the calendar year, has been successful with about 75 students participating. Through a local grant, the school received some

funding to provide the students with board games, video games, and other diversions.

"We are trying to create a casual, fun social environment for middle school students to interact with each other," Smith said.

While they want to keep things low-key, Smith said he and other staff are on hand to guide activities if necessary.

"We're working with a number of students where social interactions don't come easy for them," Smith said. "Especially in middle school, a lot of kids with special needs can feel isolated."

As the program took root, Smith said the interactions between students have become more natural.

"As these kids learn how to interact, we see it spill into the hallways and classrooms," Smith said. "Kids say 'hi' and visit with them in the hallways and outside classrooms."

The school continues to make and improve upon other efforts to provide better opportunities for its students with disabilities.

The school has adopted an inclusion model that integrates students with significant disabilities into the everyday activities of the school day. Students with disabilities have a regular homeroom, grade-level lunch, recess, and at least two full-inclusion general education classes.

Students with disabilities at Merrill Middle School are also in grade-level art, physical education, chorus, health, family and consumer education, industrial technology, world languages, and social studies. Through the inclusion model, Smith says students with disabilities get to know their peers and build friendships, and they learn how to act in the classroom from their peers and how to work with other students.



■ Getting to Work in Madison

School leaders and educators in the Madison Metropolitan School District have taken it upon themselves to find work opportunities for their students with disabilities and provide them with support so they are successful. It starts when students begin their freshman year of high school — they meet with a counselor to discuss where they see themselves after age 21. Based on the student's response, the district helps them get on the path to help the student reach their goals.

Likewise, the district's students with disabilities, along with their guardians, also meet with a counselor. The student is asked what they want to do, and the district helps them find employment.

"Our goal is to have all of our students with developmental disabilities experience 20 hours of paid employment before they graduate," said John Harper, the district's executive director of educational services.

Harper says the district meets this goal nearly every year. More impressive, students who graduate with a job tend to keep it. Many students with disabilities struggle to stay employed long-term. However, Madison reports that most of its students are still employed five years after graduation.

Harper said part of the success is due to the fact that the district asks the students what they want to do.

"We always start with 'What do you want to do?'" Harper said. "This has to be driven by the students and their families. It's our job to figure out how to get them there."

Harper says students with disabilities from the district work in a number of different areas, from food service, to hotels, and even some skilled positions. Harper says a student with autism works for a computer programming company where he builds computers.

Harper admits the district has an advantage in serving students with disabilities. The county helps transition students from school to adult-

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"They get to experience singing in a concert, making an industrial tech project, being in the school art show, learning words in other languages, or writing a report and presenting it in front of a class of their peers," Smith said. "These are experiences that do not always happen in a separate special education setting."

Additionally, through the inclusion model, Smith says, the students are part of the school community - they develop friendships with other students, go on school field trips, attend school dances, and participate in school assemblies. Smith says this was not always the case with students with significant disabilities before the school made the push toward fuller and more meaningful inclusion.

Olson agrees that students with disabilities belong in the classroom and school-wide activities.

"It's good for everyone," Olson said. "It's good for teaching, and it's good for learning."

According to Smith and Olson, another positive outcome of integrating students and holding special programs like the Peer Buddies program, is that their students with disabilities are treated with respect.

"We really haven't had incidents of harassment, but if we did, I think we'd have a lot of students sticking up for our students with special needs," Smith said.

More importantly, Smith said he believes the interactions between students in the classroom and elsewhere will help his students be more successful as they take that next step — high school.

"I hope the work we're doing and the friendships these students are forming continue — they will really help them transition to high school," Smith said.

hood and there are a number of community support and employment opportunities for students with disabilities in a larger city like Madison.

Another reason for students' success in the workforce can be attributed to a partnership with the county. The district works closely with the county to transition a student from school to employment. Once a student graduates, the county provides support to help the student continue to be successful. The county provides job shadowing and coaching support.

"Our students by and large stay in these jobs long-term," Harper said.

The district also provides support and help to families with students with disabilities. Harper said they organize informational meetings where they bring in attorneys, social security



workers, benefits analysis and others to help families transition their students from childhood to adulthood.

There are other benefits to finding and supporting students with disabilities find employment. Fred Swanson, special education teacher at Madison West High School, says his employed students reduce their draw from the social security system, "Instead of

getting a \$600 check each month, they're only getting \$100 or \$200 because they're working."

"Everyone should be doing this," Swanson said. "Every district should be focused on transition."

Culture of Acceptance

Peg Kolden, principal of the River Heights Elementary School, and her

On the Job

Transition program in Madison connects students with meaningful employment

At the Great Dane, a popular Madison restaurant, students with disabilities from the Madison Metropolitan School District that work for the restaurant come in and take care of the little things that need to happen before the place opens for business. This includes: filling the salt and pepper shakers, completing various cleaning tasks, setting up the bar, setting up the outside patios, and much more. Normally this is done by wait staff or bartenders, who usually aren't too excited about coming in early to complete the tasks.

"These guys are heroes to the servers for coming in and doing this," says Fred Swanson, special education teacher at Madison West High School.

The students are treated like regular employees – they partake in the holiday parties, get vacation time, and have the same expectations as other employees.

Swanson said in the case of the Great Dane and other businesses where his students work, business is better for hiring his students. At the Great Dane, Swanson points out that his students are much more willing to diligently dust and clean than a 20-year old server who just finished working all night.

"It's good for their business to hire my students," Swanson says.

Swanson recognizes that not all districts are located in

a larger community like Madison where more opportunities may be available. But Swanson, who has worked in smaller, rural districts, says that opportunities for students with disabilities can be found anywhere in the state.

"People need to go into this with the attitude of this can be done," Swanson said.

In addition to the Great Dane and other food service jobs,

Swanson has students working in a lab at the Discovery Center on the UW campus, running a kegging machine at the Capitol Brewery, cleaning at a fitness studio, working at a local running-shoe store. Swanson said he has found these jobs for students by networking and reaching out to businesses and employers.

"That's all it is," Swanson said. "It's teaming up with a group of students, asking them where they want to work, and then helping make it happen." □



Madison West High School student Josiah Council works at the Great Dane restaurant in Madison.



The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

Evolving issues in special education

Gary Myrah

While school boards are concerned with the continued erosion of state assistance in funding public instruction, funding for students attending private/parochial schools is increasing. The current threat to public education has been classified as one of the worst of times in the history of public education.

The outlook for special education isn't good either. The private school vouchers/scholarship for special education not only impacts funding to public schools, it eliminates the rights of students with disabilities through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The proposed legislation is a regressive action that will impact funding at the local level.

Just because our funding is reduced doesn't mean that the needs of our students with disabilities will go away. They need to be served regardless of how the costs will be covered. It's anticipated that if our share of

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staff have worked hard to build a culture of acceptance in their elementary school. At each school assembly, students and staff take the Purple Hand Pledge, a simple pledge that states "I will not use my hands or my words for hurting myself or others."

Acceptance is also a big part of the school's culture. From an early age, students with disabilities are in classrooms learning alongside their peers. Kolden, who has a son with a cognitive disability, understands that serving students with special education isn't just about educating them.

"Speaking as a parent, academic growth and learning is important, but I think social growth and opportunities to work with peers are just

as important," she says.

Kolden says she sees the benefits of this inclusiveness each day at school, whether it's a student pushing another student with disabilities in a wheelchair or students helping each other in other ways.

On the instruction side, the school has been recognized as a Response to Learning (RtI) School of Merit. This means the school meets strict standards set by the Wisconsin RtI Center, including collaboration among school leadership teams, engaging families in RtI implementation, and using data to guide and plan intervention, among other efforts needed to operate a model RtI program.

In addition to helping the school

to meet the needs of all of its students, Kolden said the RtI model has also forged a teaching team out of her staff. Teachers across the school have scheduled collaboration times.

"I think my staff has a viewpoint that they are all on the same team and that the students are 'all my kids,'" Kolden said. "Philosophically, my staff has always understood that if a student is struggling, it's the staff's responsibility to provide an intervention and help that student be successful."

Like other RtI schools, the school has a built in intervention period of 40 minutes every day for every student. Through careful scheduling, River Heights Elementary School has coordinated its intervention time

state aid is reduced, the local tax responsibility will increase or there will be a reduction in programming for the general population. This goes against the original purpose for state and federal assistance for special education programming — to provide equitable educational programming without impairing the programming of the general population.

Not only are we faced with the risk of losing revenue due to private school special education vouchers, we are also facing a perpetual reduction in federal funding through the action of the sequestration. For the 2013-14 school year, Wisconsin appears to be receiving about 5 percent less in IDEA funding. We are also faced with complications related to the Maintenance of Effort (MOE) that requires each district to maintain the previous year expenditure for services provided to children with disabilities, regardless of the statewide reduction in expenditures related to Act

10. If the MOE is not met from year to year, it is a requirement to return a calculated amount of the IDEA funding to the federal government.

The Positive

Despite these three financial challenges facing special education programs, there is a lot of good happening in our special education programs across the state. We are experiencing a tremendous growth in improved strategies and technology. New technology is reducing the impact of a child's disability and assists in their opportunity to compete in the regular classroom.

Additionally, the increased focus on universal design for learning (UDL) is helping teachers design instruction that actually assists all children in the classroom, including children with disabilities. Teachers that have embraced UDL strategies find it improves the learning opportunity for all. The positive future for special

education is occurring throughout our public schools. The professional development offered to our faculties focus on these improved strategies.

Oppose Special Education Vouchers

It's imperative that we garner support to oppose special education vouchers/scholarships. We must continue to find avenues to seek revenues from the state and federal government to provide an equitable educational opportunity for children with disabilities.

Wisconsin schools are leaders in successful education of children with special needs. They are living up to our state motto "Forward," which reflects Wisconsin's continuous drive to be a national leader. Collectively, we need to pave the way to remain a leader in education. □

Myrah is executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services.

with that of its staff so that all students have equal access to all of the staff and resources the school can provide.

The school's work is paying off. The school has seen improved reading achievement of students with disabilities, narrowed achievement gaps between white, and non-white students, and students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and students not eligible. But most importantly, Kolden said, the school is producing good students.

"I have heard teachers say they can recognize students from River Heights because of how accepting they are." ■

Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.



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