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# Each and Every Child

Quick news for Parents, Teachers and Students

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education's Bureau of Learner Strategies and Supports

## Leaving nothing to chance

Sydney Von Lehmden's teachers knew a lot about her before she set foot in her new school. It was 2011, when the fifth grader was getting ready to make the transition from grade school to middle school.

At best, the transition for a child with special needs is challenging. But Sydney's mother, Kelly, was determined to make it as pain free as possible. So she wrote a short book directed to Sydney's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team.

The book contained photos of Sydney and her family. And more important, it contained information that would help the team get to know the girl inside and out, long before the first bell rang.

"When you have a plan ahead of time, you reduce stress for everyone," Kelly said. "If I'm not worried, it will help Sydney. Particularly when it's a big transition year, I like to give information about Sydney and her family, what she likes to do, what Sydney may be nervous about."

Two years later, Sydney, now an eighth-grader at Oak Ridge Middle School in Marion, is comfortable with her surroundings and eager to start class again. But that doesn't mean that Kelly, a former chairwoman of the state Special Education Advisory Panel, sits back.

"For the parent, we are always nervous about the school year," she said. "We worry about her schedule – do the classes make sense? And how do we make sure she has quality peer interaction? We also want to make sure lunch is not stressful, and that she has friends to sit with. We want to give her as much independence as possible."

Sydney's teacher, Annette Saxion, is every bit as proactive as Kelly.

"Before school starts, I email the parents or call them and invite them to come in," Annette said. "I find that some parents are not comfortable in a school setting, most likely because they didn't have a good experience themselves, so I have no problem meeting them at a restaurant for coffee – whatever the parents feel comfortable with."

Annette even takes the initiative with the students.

"If the student is capable, I like to start an email conversation with the student before school starts up," she said. "I put them at ease, and I learn something about them."

For Annette, getting students comfortable with their new surroundings actually starts the year before.

"I like to have my new incoming students tour the building a couple times," she said. "We want to acclimate the students to the building to help them feel more comfortable with finding their way around. During the prior school year, the incoming sixth graders tour our building and meet the other students in my room. I have my students share with our soon-to-be new students what middle school is like."

"It's my job to make them feel comfortable. When they are nervous, it's impossible for them to perform in their studies very well."

But making them comfortable is only one step in getting the students to maximize their education experience.

"As I get to know the students, I work on finding their strengths and weaknesses," Annette said. "We also work a lot on emotions in class. If we're anxious, perhaps we're not ready to learn."

Ongoing teacher-parent communication needs to be agreed upon at the beginning of the school year, both teacher and mother agree.

"We need to establish with the teacher how we're going to communicate, whether a daily note, email, phone call – it's important to set expectations for both of you," Kelly said.

And, of course, the student's IEP needs to be examined – by all who work with students with special needs.

"I feel good when the IEP is looked at by everyone, not just the special education teacher but all teachers who work with Sydney so they know what her goals are," Kelly said.

Then there's the flurry of last-minute back-to-school activities.

"We just talked about having a bedtime that's earlier," Kelly said. "We are learning how to set an alarm, and we are working back into our school bedtime routine. We also bought a backpack, and scheduled an eye appointment and physical."

Sydney, who plays basketball and volleyball and is a percussionist in the school band, practiced the combination on her locker during a recent visit. She says she's ready and eager.

Her favorite subject? She says both math and reading. But then she smiles.

"Everything."

And what happens in a year when Sydney becomes a freshman at Linn-Mar High School?

"I will have another book ready to go," Kelly said. "You can count on that."

## Write your own book

Write what you know about your child – no more than four pages. This will help school employees – from special education teachers to their peers in general education – successfully guide your child's school experience. Here are some good topics:

- History (family)
- Health history
- Therapy
- Personality (describe the child you know)
- Strengths
- Areas that need shoring up (such as "social skills")
- Child's specific needs (academic, peer/adult support)
- Parents' concerns and fears (such as low expectations among staff, child eating lunch alone or riding bus)

- Parents' expectations (such as grade-level performance)