

# Each and Every Child

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## To the top of the class

*Grinnell school named best for IEP education delivery*

Cherrill Oxenford was hesitant. OK, perhaps even more than hesitant. Her new principal, Jeff Kirby, decided they were going to change things up at Davis Elementary in Grinnell. That included, among other things, bringing together general and special education students into one classroom.

To the then 27-year special education teacher, the idea was as foreign as Tasmania.

"I was used to doing pull out, and I thought that was what we were supposed to do," Oxenford said. "Opening our doors to one another turned everything I knew upside down. We didn't use to expose the kids to a general education curriculum. We thought 'oh no, they can't do that.'"

But yes they could. And four short years later, Davis Elementary has been named the best school in the state for delivering high-quality education to students on Individualized Education Programs, edging



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

*Cherrill Oxenford works with a student at Davis Elementary.*

out last year's winner, Northeast Elementary in Ankeny. The Davis Elementary team was honored for its Breaking Barriers Award before the State Board of Education in November.

And Oxenford? She's a convert.

"When Mr. Kirby arrived, he changed my life," she said. "I was still in a segregated mindset. When he said we were going to open the doors, it was an evolution. It is great, it's fulfilling to see these changes."

So just what is going on at Davis? Plenty.

***Continued on next page***



Justin White

But nothing the principal thinks is particularly spectacular.

"We didn't come up with a brilliant new idea," says Kirby, who also is the special education director of Grinnell-Newburg Community School District. "We do PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) and meet regularly. As a special ed. team, we meet weekly, we progress monitor data, we share ideas and problem solve. When you walk in you are not going to say 'wow that is amazing.'"

Perhaps not, but consider the results: Among the students on IEPs at Davis, a whopping 82 percent are proficient in reading and math. That compares to a statewide average of 43 percent.

"Where we started was a change in our mindset, from 'their' students to 'our' students," Kirby said. "There had been a distinct separation of the students. We now view all of our kids as general education students. I think that's key."

Today, a visitor to Davis Elementary is struck by how vibrant a classroom is. One cannot discern the general education students and teachers from their special-needs counterparts. Co-teaching is seamless; all teachers work with all students. Positive relationships with the students is evident.

"There's lots of specialized instruction," Kirby said. "But that specialized instruction is not just for the special education kids, but all kids."

## Finding the top school

What does it take to be the best school in the state when it comes to educating students on Individualized Education Programs? The Iowa Department of Education combed through school-level data throughout the state to find the schools that had the highest percentage of students on IEPs who were proficient in a combined average of reading and math. Five years' worth of data was examined to ensure the school was experiencing a positive trend. In addition, principals were interviewed. And finally, schools with more than 13 percent of their student population on IEPs were eliminated from consideration because anything higher likely means overrepresentation.

Another Davis special education teacher, Justin White, is sold on inclusion, as well.

"All students can learn at high levels – every child," said White, who has taught for 13 years. "In the past, we received kids that you would think could only achieve at a certain level. But with inclusion, we tap into higher levels. We now realize that these kids can achieve at high levels. I know what it's like to get into your own little world, and keep doing the same thing. But once you realize things can be better, you have to say, 'OK, we need to make changes.'"

The Iowa Core standards also are key to the school's success.

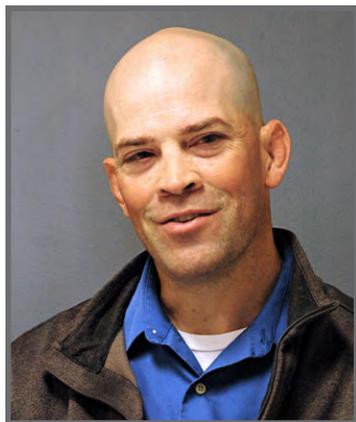
"Rigor is always better than what we were doing before," White said. "Yes, the Iowa Core is challenging, but that is a good problem to have. That is where creativity comes out. You think of a hundred different ways to teach a particular standard. Get outside your comfort zone, challenge yourself to make high-achieving students. This is critical for 21st century skills. We want to create productive citizens."

Oxenford agrees.

"They are now learning higher-order thinking skills," she said. "Much of the higher-order thinking can be done through a lower-level book."



Justin White shares a light moment with a student at Davis Elementary.



Jeff Kirby

Kirby also is a fan.

"The Iowa Core pushes our students," he said. "Initially there was concern that the kids couldn't learn this stuff. But it simply isn't true. The Iowa Core pushes teachers to reach a higher level."

Adds Seth Kite, Davis Elementary's 267 Area Education Agency representative, "If you look at the core and say 'my student cannot do that,' you are setting a ceiling of what the student can learn."

The Davis team has worked closely with Kite in revolutionizing the school's education delivery.

"We use the concept of continuous improvement," he said. "We talk about the specific skills, the materials we are working on, the types of groups we are using for instruction. We also want to make sure that

our work is consistent."

The school has also moved to daily 30-minute breaks in which all students receive either interventions or enhancements.

"What is unique is that every teacher is part of the process," Kirby said. "We blend our grades together and everyone participates."

Underscoring everything the Davis team does is incorporating data into their everyday work.

"Data drives instruction," Kirby said. "What is our data telling us? What are the needs of every child? Are we making the right kind of progress? And if not, what are we going to do about it?"

And finally, the school pushes reading with what Oxenford calls "good-fit books" that tap into each student's interest and skill level. They even partner with the various groups within the community.

"We promote the love of reading," Kirby said. "I hate to overlook that because we talk so much technical stuff. For instance, we have a family reading night and we had 70 percent of the families show up."

Adds White, "We also involve the public in Grinnell. We go to nursing home and read to the elderly, we work with the fire stations. We



Seth Kite

involve the community so that the students know it is important to be good readers."

"The kids actually read to each other now," Oxenford said.

And the kids notice the difference, too.

"The kids today now feel like they can do it," Kirby said. "This is a huge transformation."

Though it has been a tough journey, Kirby said every minute has been worth it.

"The amount of change in the last four years has been pretty significant," he said, to which Oxenford nods vigorously. "What is amazing to me is how much more accepting people are of change – they are seeing the overall mission, and we have had success. Change is hard, but look what can happen."



Cherrill Oxenford

## Takeaways of a top-notch school:

- Co-teaching, minimum pull-out
- Professional Learning Communities
- "Our kids" philosophy
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports
- Iowa Core
- Set-aside time for intervention/enrichment for all
- Positive teacher-student relationships

