



Each and Every Child

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Getting to the nuts and bolts

How to make Specially Designed Instruction effective – and scalable

Don't expect Ronda Hilbert to sugarcoat her words about the state of special education.

"I think it is a shame that we know what we should be accomplishing but we don't get it done," said the special education consultant from the Grant Wood Area Education Agency. "Have we been making progress in the education gap? No. In the medical field, we would throw a fit. If you had a sore throat and it didn't get better, you would go back to the doctor and say, 'I am still not well.' So why is this OK in education?"

Of course, Hilbert knows the answer: There's a lack of evidence-based research that is both sustainable and scalable. Practices throughout Iowa have been scattershot, at best. And while 80 percent of non-IEP students are proficient in literacy in Iowa, only 40 percent of those on IEPs are proficient. And that can lead to long-term problems.

non-proficient in literacy from third to fifth grade, it takes two hours of literacy instruction every day throughout the school year to close that education gap,"

Hilbert said.

Still, Hilbert, along with many of her peers and a cadre of 12 school



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

"A study shows that for students who are

Special Education Teacher Kyle Paulson works with a student, keenly focusing on the child's skill deficiencies.

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Kyle Paulson



Susan O'Dell



Ronda Hilbert

districts throughout the state, remains optimistic. They are participating as usability sites for a scaling of a Specially Designed Instruction literacy initiative, or SDI, that promises to bloom into solid, concrete practices that educators can deploy. Unlike a pilot project, usability sites are essentially what they sound like: working to see what works, why it works and how it can be scaled to size. Once that's completed, SDI pilots will be implemented throughout the state.

The framework being developed today has a more laser-like focus than the language currently provided in the law. The statewide goal is that within the next four years, special education teachers will have at their fingertips specific effective strategies to substantially bolster literacy efforts in their classrooms.

Over 150 educators and other stakeholders worked to develop a common language – diagnosis, design, delivery and engagement – in developing the SDI framework.

“With diagnosis, we want to diagnose why a child is not proficient,” said Susan O'Dell, also a special education literacy consultant at Grant Wood. “With many

students who are in special education, we are still not sure what works to accelerate their progress. They may not have their skills pinpointed, particularly in phonological needs. So the first step is to diagnose which skill areas need to be targeted with Specially Designed Instruction.”

In designing instruction, it is imperative to determine precisely what will work to effectively tackle the deficiencies. And in delivery, it is looking into whether the student is responding to the interventions.

“We use multiple sources of data to determine that,” O'Dell said. “We use progress monitoring and also look at formative assessments that are within the instruction to see if they are making progress.”

Last but certainly not least is engagement.

“We need to engage the parents, the students and the teachers in all of these steps,” she said.

But O'Dell said that all of this is for naught if data isn't the central theme throughout.

“Everything goes back to the data,” she

said. “If the progress monitoring data is not showing the gap closing, and the student's learning is not accelerated, then we are not doing what we should be doing.”

At North Bend Elementary School in North Liberty, the SDI framework is already making inroads. Special education teacher Kyle Paulson, who works closely with O'Dell, is seeing his students honing their skills more quickly.

“What I like most about SDI is having the ability to cater to the individual student's needs,” he said. “As educators, we know that children learn in different ways. The SDI process has allowed me to really take a look at my student's data and determine what course of action we need to take as a team in order to help our students make gains in the areas they are struggling with. The nice thing about SDI is that it is an ongoing process. Most of my students have made great gains throughout the year, and the one or two that stalled out are now receiving different instruction. The SDI process allows us to really look at the data and determine if sufficient progress is being made. If not, we need to find a way to alter what we are doing in an effort to see better results.”

This SDI framework is being designed to vastly improve success among students on IEPs.

"These kids get these special education services so that they can close the gap," O'Dell said. "They don't receive these services so that we can excuse their lack of proficiency. You are making an excuse for why they are not proficient."

Which leads to a teacher's belief system.

"Teachers have to believe every student can succeed," O'Dell said. "If they don't believe, that will influence their instruction. You truly have to believe as a teacher that 'I want this student to be here at the end of 36 weeks.' When you truly believe – as I have seen with so many teachers – you see lots of students being exited from special education."

Still, challenging a belief system – let alone changing it – is difficult, she acknowledged. But success in the

classroom goes a long way in chipping away at disbelief.

"I would tell them to first to set ambitious goals and believe the student can achieve those," O'Dell said. "Then really hone in on the skills that the children are missing. Do your interventions with fidelity and always look at the data to see if you are on target or missing the mark. When teachers see students making progress, that is where the belief system starts to change."

O'Dell stresses the critical importance of those ambitious skills.

"You have to set ambitious goals since special education students are expected to gain more than their average peers," she said. "If we don't do that, the lines of achievement with their peers remain parallel and the gap stays the same. They improve, but they don't catch up to their peers."

At North Bend Elementary, for instance, the staff refused to give up on two students.

"We had a couple students who needed help on multisyllabic decoding and they needed to be able to practice it in stories so that they are not just word reading, but applying it to authentic text," she said. "And those kids were exited from special education as fifth graders!"

As the usability sites eventually evolve into bona fide pilots across the state, O'Dell is confident teachers will be enthusiastic about the SDI framework.

"The SDI framework allows us to thoroughly examine what students with reading disabilities need and commit to delivering it," she said. "I have no doubt that when we look at the whole child, and collaboratively provide SDI, that we will close the achievement gap for students with reading disabilities."

Registration details will be available in March 2016

SPECIAL EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM



Save the Date

Keynote Speakers **Don Deshler**
Todd Whitaker
Tim Harris

June 13-14, 2016

Iowa Events Center
Des Moines, Iowa

Symposium will offer the following opportunities:

- Connect with special educators from across the state (AEA staffs; Local School staffs; parents; and administrators).
- Become informed on the implementation of effective strategies for specially designed instruction across all areas of special education.
- Hear from state leaders on statewide special education efforts anticipated in the coming years.

