Power in numbers

Afterschool program unites minds, ambitions

Teachers in Waterloo’s high schools were alarmed at what they were seeing: Too many students receiving special education services were getting into trouble outside school.

“They needed something to belong to, they needed some caring adults and peers.”

Today, some 24 students from East and West high schools participate in Link, in which the program’s title has even morphed into a verb: “are we linking today?”

While the high schools initially had their own individual programs, the students threw the longstanding intra-district rivalry aside to combine the programs.

“The kids preferred it,” Alfrey said.

And they do.

At a recent Link meeting, sophomores Alexis Jones, Chris Lien, Shareese Gamblin and Zavyon Nix were planning the upcoming year’s activities. As facilitators – now done by students instead of teachers – they have chosen this year’s theme: “Focus on the Future.”

“It’s an easy way for us to show everything we’re doing,” Chris said.

And it’s the future that guides these students. Link takes them off campus, visiting all sorts of businesses and doing all sorts of activities – things they indeed will need in life, from opening a checking account to asking for a job application. They also go to the middle schools to explain to peers what high school is like in hopes of allaying fears. It keeps the students busy, excited – and learning the social, or soft skills required to be successful in life.

“One of the biggest things I see is that socially they are doing a lot better than the students who are not participating,” said Katie Kim-

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“It is a lot easier for them to get jobs or a job interview, or asking for accommodations in college – they practice that in here at Link.”

Krista Pugh, the special education instructional coach at East, said social skills should not be discounted in a student’s education.

“You need social skills in everything you do in life,” she said. “You need them for employment, you need them for relationships.”

And bonus: The newfound connection to school has improved the students’ academics.

“I see where the kids started, and feel like they are totally transformed,” Kimber said. “A graduate who was plugged in all the time listening to music and head down and wasn't talking to anyone. Now she is engaged with others, and I’m so excited that she has that – it is something she’ll have for the rest of the life.”

Something the students notice is a confidence they lacked just a year ago.

“The Link helps me out of my shyness.” Alexis said. “I had a problem around big groups and just wanted to stay at home and be by myself in my own room. Now I am learning how to be around other people and having fun. I look forward to coming to the meetings because I get to meet new students and new people and get to know what they are like.”

For Zavyon, the Link keeps his life safe and productive.

“It gives me more stuff to do after school,” he said. “Before I was at home playing video games. The Link keeps me off the streets.”

The afterschool program also establishes a new social network.

“For me, it means a time to get away from the family and be with people who have the same similarities and interests as me,” Chris said. “I really enjoy it because most of the time I am uptight and serious about getting my school work done. Being here I can be calm and enjoy things.”

The Link for Shareese has given her a new perspective on her life.

“There’s plenty to plan for the up-
coming school year, but one thing is definite: The students will host a picnic party for friends, family and teachers at the end of the school year in which they do everything from menu selection to cooking.

“It is something they did last year and really liked it,” Krista said. “It was quite successful.”

And today, dreams that may have gone unrealized now seem within arm’s reach. Shareese is thinking about college and pursuing a medical career. Zavyon likes working with his hands, and is looking to the engineering field. Alexis is looking at more immediate needs, like studying for her driver’s permit. And Chris envisions becoming a cartoonist.

“I am thinking about being an artist and writer – perhaps be a cartoonist based on our cats and my sister and my brother,” he said. “The cats have great personalities.”
There was a time when children with significant disabilities were warehoused in institutions. Boys and girls alike had their heads shaved. Cleaning? They were hosed down.

“Standing at the beginning of the 20th century, I was working with children who had been warehoused, confined, in schools that were not designed to meet their needs. We had to break the cycle that kept those kids from entering school. It was a difficult time,” Barb said.

“Now, however, society has come a long way in the last 30 years.”

Barb envisions that within the next decade, the delivery of special education will evolve from a procedural compliance emphasis to results-based education in which personalized instruction will be in place for all students – not just those on Individualized Education Programs. “Sure, test results will be a part of that, but we will be examining other potential measures, such as the percent of students going to college or the percent of students engaged in extracurricular activities,” she said.

In addition, Barb envisions a more cohesive service system for students with mental and behavior issues, as well as an extended and stronger relationship with all stakeholders to ensure the responsibility for students’ education doesn’t fall solely on the schools.

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- Barb Guy

Meet Iowa’s director of special education

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Conference nears on effective teaching practices for 21st Century

There still is time to register for an Oct. 23 conference in Des Moines aimed at effectively teaching students with disabilities.

“Reaching and Teaching 21st Century Learners with Disabilities” is being sponsored by the Iowa Council of Administrators of Special Education and the Iowa Council for Exceptional Children.

The daylong conference will include keynote speaker Ako Kambon, president of Visionary Leaders Institute, who will speak on incorporating everyday classroom strategies, as well as improving parental involvement in schools. There also will be breakout sessions focused on legal issues, secondary transition and Response to Intervention.

Cost for parents and students is $85, which includes lunch and snacks. Members of either group pay $110 for the conference, and non-members pay $135. Deadline for registration is Oct. 9.

To register, scroll down below the newsletter for a live link.