



Lakers making special ed inclusion program work

Including special education students in classes with general education students presents some challenges, but Laker administrators and teachers have worked hard to make it effective at all grade levels.

Lakers has noticed multiple successes since the special education inclusion program debuted a few years ago, such as improved grades, better assessment scores and fewer discipline issues. Because of this, other schools have visited Lakers to see how the program works.

“It’s doing great things for kids, and I’ve learned a lot about myself (since the program began),” said high school special education teacher Susan Dubs. “It takes you back to why you wanted to be a teacher. You’re learning along with your students.”

HOW IT WORKS

At the heart of the inclusion program is co-teaching. Special education teachers join general education teachers in the classrooms and they share duties.

“Inclusion classes allow special education and regular education teachers to share instructional duties and assist each other with grading, discipline and providing extra help to all students,” said Superintendent Brian Keim, who previously served as the secondary school principal. “Students with special learning needs are then included in these regular classes - thus the term “inclusion” - and are able to learn more than they would in an isolated class taught by a special education teacher alone.”

The high school does inclusion by grade level. Each special education teacher follows students in a

specific grade level throughout each school day. Chad Craig is with the ninth graders, Tim Warneck is with the 10th graders and Dubs is with the juniors and seniors.

At the junior high, the special education students are split between two teachers: Lauren Armbruster and Mallory Klosowski.

“Our junior high inclusion program matches special education teachers with different content areas so they can co-teach classes that best fit their areas of expertise,” Keim noted.

At the high school level, special education students spend a portion of their day with the special education teacher assigned to their grade level. During this time, the special education teacher helps reinforce the lessons they have learned throughout the day in their general education classes.

At the elementary level, special education teachers Scott Copeland and Jill Smith are assigned to different grade levels and they co-teach with the grade-level teachers.

As part of co-teaching, the general and special education teachers work together on lesson planning and the special education teachers create specific, personalized accommodations to help special education students learn the concepts. What the accommodations are depend on a student’s individual education plan (IEP), which is created with input from the teachers, administrators and parents. For instance, some special education students may need extra support in specific areas of math, but may not need support in reading.

Keeping the special education students working at the same pace and level of the general education curriculum can be a challenge for the special education teachers. That’s why having on-going communication with the general education teachers is so important in making the inclusion program work.

The special education and general education teachers have worked well together in delivering lessons and the supports needed for students to achieve.

“Laker general educators have been awesome and very accommodating, very considerate and very respectful to myself and to the kids,” Armbruster said.

HOW STUDENTS BENEFIT

Learning alongside their general education counterparts helps motivate the special education students, the special education teachers said.

“For special education students, they are getting the general education Common Core (Curriculum) Standards, but are still able to get the accommodations that each student needs and has in their IEPs,” Armbruster said. “Kids are pretty happy and doing quite well. I think they are pretty pumped up that they are doing what everyone else is doing, and not doing badly.”

Having two teachers in the classroom is a benefit for all students. With co-teaching, not only do the special education students get needed attention, but other students who need extra help. Having two teachers in the room alleviates a lot of discipline problems, which has a positive effect on student achievement.

“(It’s a benefit) having another adult (who) may have a different teaching style in the classroom to allow for more learning,” Armbruster said.

Klosowski said the special education inclusion program benefits special education students because they are learning/absorbing the same information as general education students.

“This may be done at a different pace, but the exposure to those new concepts is very beneficial,” Klosowski said. “The inclusion program benefits general education students because they have the benefit of two teachers in their classroom and this allows for concepts to be taught in multiple ways. Both groups of students have two teachers that they can ask questions of and receive academic support from.”

She said one of the challenges to making inclusion work has been developing a schedule that works for everybody involved. However, this hasn’t been in the way of the program being successful.

“I feel like the system we have in place is working quite well,” she said.

Klosowski said she’s really enjoyed the experiences she’s gaining while teaching in the inclusion setting.

“I appreciate being able to teach and get to know entire classrooms of students instead of just the ones receiving special education services,” she said.

Teachers said inclusion has had another wonderful benefit for general education students. They accept and help the students who need some extra assistance and they do it without being asked. Teachers believe inclusion has been an excellent character building experience for students and it has increased students' compassion for one another. They said these benefits will stay with the students as they grow into young adults, and they will be very able and willing to help members of society with special needs and show brotherly love.

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

Keim said Lakers certainly is not the first school district to try special education inclusion, but making it work well is something not all schools have achieved.

"Many schools have tried and failed with inclusion, but our teachers have worked hard, made adjustments and found early success with this approach, which is why we are now gaining attention from other schools," Keim said. "Our teachers believe this is the best way for our students to learn, so they are willing to do whatever it takes to make it work. This commitment is the key to our success."

Laker Elementary Principal Kathy Dickens said she's thrilled by what she's witnessed so far in the inclusion program and she's looking forward to more successes as the program continues and improves.

"Co-teaching isn't easy, but when the two teachers develop that rhythm in the classroom, it's really magical," she said.

Laker administrators and teachers said inclusion success hasn't happened overnight, but with the dedication of all involved, the program is doing what it's supposed to do - ensure student achievement for all students.