This Is Us

Inclusiveness and instructional support help students with special needs and others excel

By Emily Nickell

Yale (Oklahoma) Public Schools superintendent Dale Bledsoe has a child with special needs, and his firsthand experience has given him a vision for what it takes to support students with special needs. He wants them to be active participants in regular classrooms, and he strives to help building leaders like myself support special education in schools.

Yale is a town of about 1,200 people located in rural Oklahoma. Yale Elementary School has 207 pre-K–5 students, 72 percent of whom get free or reduced-price lunches—and 50 of whom have individualized education programs (IEPs). To support these students, superintendent Bledsoe has championed universal design for learning (UDL) practices. Since UDL is designed to meet every student’s strengths and needs, some elements can help students with disabilities and students without disabilities alike.

Supporting Teachers
Yale supports students with special needs by providing various supports for its teachers in the classroom and during professional development time. We also “mainstream” the children as much as possible, so staff and students alike view the student body as “all of us” instead of “us and them.”

Yale Elementary won a school improvement grant that allowed us to purchase technologies to help students learn. With the resources, we purchased iPads for classrooms and gave each teacher a $100 gift card to purchase apps for the devices. We also asked them to share what else they might need in the classroom. While we couldn’t promise
everything, we promised to try our hardest. This allowed our teachers to dream big.

We introduced a data wall in the professional development room to track student literacy. Every child in the school has a nametag on the wall, and they are moved up or down depending on performance. This leads to formal and informal discussions about helping students improve.

To address students with auditory and hearing impairments and attention issues, we installed an FM unit. The teacher wears a microphone that channels sounds to receivers students wear. This helps students differentiate the teacher’s voice from other sounds around them and understand directions better. It also amplifies the teacher’s voice, benefiting all students.

Speech Teletherapy
Many students with special needs have speech therapy specified in their IEPs, so when our speech language pathologist, Emily Springer, moved to another state, we needed to find a new way to satisfy their needs. Fortunately, she went to work for teletherapy provider PresenceLearning and introduced us to the concept.

We launched teletherapy services during the 2018–2019 school year, and we have already seen great progress. Students adapted well to the online sessions—some of which are led remotely by Springer. “The students view the technology as fun and enjoy the games and GIFs I can put on the screen through the PresenceLearning platform,” Springer says. “These keep students engaged and motivated during sessions.

“I communicate regularly with teachers at Yale Elementary School via video, email, or phone during IEP meetings or when specific questions come up about how to help students,” she adds. “It is clear the staff is invested in helping each student, and the open communication and teamwork really makes a difference.

“For example, we had a pre-K student who had a severe speech issue, and his teacher wanted to conduct language arts and mathematics assessments with him,” Springer says. “I had already done his initial evaluation, so I felt comfortable [in helping] interpret what he was saying when answering questions. By having me there to help interpret, the teacher could better assess his knowledge.”

Using Response to Intervention to Build Community
Yale uses the MAP Reading Fluency assessment from NWEA in the fall, winter, and spring to group students of similar abilities together for reading instruction. During these “Walk to Read” sessions, students walk to a classroom to be with other students on the same reading level. We keep the groups of students small (five to 10 students), and every educator participates, including the PE teacher. Students read for about 20 minutes and receive instruction based on their skill level; it’s a great way for teachers to work with students they might not see on a regular basis.

Superintendent Bledsoe visits our school a few times a week to go to classrooms and meet students. One day, a student was having difficulty with speech therapy, and he sat down and started playing a speech game with the student. This type of hands-on involvement trickles down to all campuses and has helped school administrators better support students.

Yale’s school culture is focused on inclusiveness. We look forward to continuing our vision for special education support and helping our school be a community of “us.”

Emily Nickell is principal of Yale Elementary School in Yale, Oklahoma.