

Promising Practices Newsletter

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Spotlighting promising practices from the Making Schools Work Conference

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Inclusive Strategies to Teach Students With Autism

By Jahana Martin, SREB

Many schools and districts have programs that serve students with special needs. These students benefit from the specialized instruction they receive from educators skilled in special education. But when students transition to general education classes, teachers may experience challenges delivering inclusive instruction to all students.



Samantha Vasy and Kelly Cassella

Many general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach students with developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder because they lack the resources, strategies and support needed to deliver equitable teaching. ASD can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.

According to the [CDC](#), about one in 44 children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder. Typically, they develop at different rates than normal childhood progression, and this impacts their success and ability to function in the classroom. Some characteristics of autism that may impact student success include delayed language skills, delayed cognitive or learning skills, hyperactive, impulsive and inattentive behaviors, increased anxiety and challenges with social communication and interactions.

Kelly Cassella and Samantha Vasy, educators who specialize in special education, explore three areas to help transition students with ASD into a general education setting – teacher preparation, classroom environment and curriculum.

Teacher Preparation

Some students transition from full-time autistic support to no autistic support when they enter a general education classroom because most general education teachers are not trained to address their needs. “When teachers feel a lack of confidence to properly educate students with ASD, it could severely impact how they deliver academic instruction and overall classroom success,” says Cassella, special education director and head of school at New Story School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Educators can facilitate a student’s transition to a general education classroom by **reviewing student data and asking questions**. Teachers may prepare for and learn about their students by assessing data such as previous grades, behavior reports, progress in an

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individualized education program, formal and informal assessments, teacher observations and family reports, explains Vasy, a districtwide special education coordinator at Propel Schools in Pittsburgh.

They can probe further to find out how a student interacts with others, how often the student participates in class, what type of accommodations/modifications the student will need to be successful and how much special education support the student will require in the general education setting.

Next, teachers can **collaborate** with others who may or may not be on the student's IEP team including parents, general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, counselors or school psychologists to create an appropriate transition plan. Last, commit to **never stop learning**. Educators can attend relevant conferences, conduct research and participate in professional learning communities and professional development.



Classroom Environment

Children with autism benefit from predictability and structure. Teachers can achieve this by implementing a **classroom management plan** that promotes a safe and inclusive setting. The plan should include classroom rules, routines and procedures, and a classroom contingency plan because students need clear, simple rules and expectations that are consistently and fairly applied, Vasy says.

“Students need a template or a model. If they’re missing executive functioning skills (brain functions that account for short- and long-term consequences of actions), they need a template that tells them what information they need,” Cassella explains. “Peer modeling, routines and procedures need to be taught and practiced every day.”

Vasy agrees. Research indicates well-structured environments help decrease disruptive behavior, anxiety and confusion for students with autism, therefore increasing their academic performance, she adds.

Curriculum

The curriculum should be inclusive. “Intentionally create lessons where you have **collaboration**,” Vasy offers. Teachers can implement cooperative learning groups that encourage students to work together on a structured activity. Small group instruction allows flexible and differentiated learning as well as opportunities for social interactions. Peer teaching supports students as they work together to solve problems.

Contacts: Kelly A. Cassella, kelly.cassella@newstoryschools.com and Samantha Vasy, samanthavasy@propelschools.org



This video is an example of how a teacher may establish routines for student behavior in any classroom.

Cultivating Resilient Teachers and Leaders

By Diane James, SREB

Teaching can be a very rewarding career, but teachers face complex challenges that take a toll, especially on the heels of COVID-19 challenges.



Mary Leslie Anderson, principal and Erin Rigot, instructional coach

Mary Leslie Anderson, principal, and Erin Rigot, instructional coach of League Academy in Greenville, South Carolina, say now more than ever, schools must play a role in building the confidence and resilience of teachers to become effective leaders. League Academy is a top performing public magnet middle school that serves nearly 800 students in grades six through eight.

Anderson notes that over the past few years, in addition to the stresses of trying to meet district, state and federal accountability requirements, teachers in her building are dealing with a host of issues that they have never faced.

They include heightened concerns about school safety and security, a lack of trust between educators and the community, increased student disciplinary problems and conflict resolution, a rise in the number of students living in poverty, student learning loss and a student mental health crisis.

She advocates that resilient school teachers and leaders need to be prepared to respond to all types of needs and crises and build resilience among teachers so that they can do their jobs effectively “without crumbling under the severe stress we have.” According to Anderson, resilient teachers bounce back from the struggles they face in education and understand that they are leaders in the school building, too.

To help build resilience Anderson and Rigot devised a **Reflect, Connect and Lead** model that promotes teacher self-care and empowerment.

Reflect and Connect

Self-reflection is the first step to becoming resilient, notes Rigot. She expresses that teachers aren’t often given time to reflect, and when they are, it’s related to their lessons in the classroom and not to themselves.

Everyone has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, but schools have focused on the students, indicates Rigot. Teachers often internalize the anxieties and trauma of their students while coping with their own stresses. Rigot is adamant that “we have to take care of the teachers in order to take care of the kids.”

According to Rigot, reflection means allowing teachers to reflect on how they’re doing, and how they’re impacted by what’s going on in society, and then allowing time for them to connect or share with others.

For example, at League Academy, during weekly PLC (professional learning community) meetings, teachers are offered five minutes to stop and reflect. This might be in the form of answering a few questions on a sheet of paper or Google form or turning



to a neighbor and discussing a reflective question. Oftentimes, the sharing is very emotional, notes Rigot. “It gives teachers permission to grieve everything that’s been going on in the world of education,” she notes.

Another activity involves a trust-building exercise in which a PLC team reflects on why they have a difficult time working together and devise solutions. The PLCs led to better understanding and trust among teachers.

Lead

The centerpiece of the Reflect, Connect and Lead model is building trust and comradery among adults in the building, indicates Anderson. If the adults in the building aren’t working together, then the students are not getting the best support, she insists.

We have to take care of our teachers in order to take care of the kids.

Erin Rigot, League Academy instructional coach

At League Academy, 95% of teachers say they trust the administration, according to Anderson. Gaining that trust takes a lot of hard work. She offers these strategies:

- Put teachers' needs at the forefront. It's hard for teachers to trust administrators if they view them as evaluators or authority figures who get in the way of teaching.
- Show teachers that you are "walking the walk with them." It means being visible, approachable and having an open door policy. "I'm in the trenches every day," says Anderson, "not just on lunch duty or hall duty, but doing the work with them," she adds.
- Help teachers solve problems, both personal and professional.
- Support and empower teachers.
- Help teachers realize that they too are leaders. Teachers have the most contact with students every day and that makes them leaders, states Rigot.

School leaders who create safe spaces for teachers, staff, students and the community to work, learn and visit will produce an understanding, empathic and resilient learning environment.

Contacts: Mary Leslie Anderson, makander@greenville.k12.sc.us and Erin Rigot, erigot@greenville.k12.sc.us

Helping Immigrant Students Gain Social Capital and Find Success

By Allyson Morgan and David Raney, SREB

Social capital is an important factor in determining academic success for all students. For those in the Latinx immigrant community, social capital is hampered by issues encountered in schools across the U.S., but especially in the Southeast. Educational leaders would do well to assess whether they are encouraging the development of social capital for this group of students or inadvertently harming it.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital is something we exchange to work together effectively and achieve common goals. Essentially it relies on who we know — our network. "Students with social capital know the right people to get help when they need it," says Clifford Lee, a Spanish teacher at J.L. Mann High School in Greenville, South Carolina.



Clifford Lee, Spanish teacher,
J.L. Mann High School

Lee explains there are two kinds of social capital: *bridging*, which exists between groups — for example, social classes, ethnic groups or religions — and *bonding*, which refers to strong ties within such a group.

Many immigrant students enter our schools without any bridging social capital. Schools may have an elaborate system of support for immigrants, focusing on academics and language acquisition, but too often these systems set students apart rather than give them opportunities to succeed together.

Barriers to Social Capital

Lee, who has studied this phenomenon, has become an advocate for productive change. In his area, he says, "The Latinx population has exploded over the last 15 to 20 years. From 2000-2010 alone, it quadrupled. At J.L. Mann, it currently stands at about 12%."

And unlike places like Houston, he says, where many people's grandparents were immigrants from Mexico, the Latinx population is not a long-established demographic in upstate South Carolina. That's the reason there still remain plenty of barriers to fostering social capital in education.

"Social capital happens organically," Lee says, "but it can also be cultivated if barriers are removed." Those barriers are generally not institutional apathy or ill will but specific practices that, while well-intentioned, can harm or hamper the development of social capital. Lee interviewed students and colleagues and shared some of the issues that arose:

- No honors ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) classes: Latinx students are assigned to remedial language classes or stay in separate resource rooms all day. "Academic highflyers who move here and get put in low-achieving classes, separated from their peers, can sometimes disengage."

- Foreign language teachers (or other students) used as translators: “Subtle word changes can make a huge difference. I’m fluent, but I wouldn’t negotiate a legal contract or a medical plan. We need pros.”
- Educators misunderstanding common family values that are culturally bound: “This can be something as simple as not wanting to leave home for college, or respecting teachers too much to ask questions or complain.”
- Not understanding that Latinx communities are internally diverse as well: Mexico is different from Cuba, which is different from Venezuela.

Social capital isn’t about changing students, Lee says; it has to do with common experience, a shared community. “It doesn’t mean assimilation, everyone acting the same. It’s about giving students — all of them — the tools they need to succeed.”

Building Positive Relationships

Educators are searching for ways to lower these barriers while still providing the supports that immigrant students need. Lee has spoken to colleagues in other states and found that some districts use affinity groups to discuss Latinx issues in open forums, or formal intake centers for English Language Learners that dispense with “the piecemeal approach.”

His own school, J.L. Mann, is creating an introduction program for new Latinx immigrants, making an extra effort to communicate about common experiences in their language and in a way that helps them feel connected. A formal orientation program is planned for August 2023. The school created a welcome center where all registrations are conducted in a student’s first language, and it engaged tutoring and interpreting services to support student learning in its increasingly heterogeneous classrooms.

“More teachers are paying attention to these students,” Lee says, “not just ESOL teachers, and understanding the difference between content and language objectives. We all have the resources accessible now to do that.”

Building positive relationships within the immigrant population has helped create that same dynamic with other groups. The goal has been maximum interaction, a climate in which all students have opportunities to learn the ethnic culture.

As Lee puts it, “There needs to be investment from the top down to help immigrant students obtain social capital, but it’s worth it. Addressing cultural inertia and the blinders we all carry supports strong academic outcomes for all students, across the board. Everybody wins.”

Contact: Clifford Lee, cjlee@greenvilleschools.us



Coaching for Change Conference

Registration is open for the SREB’s [Coaching for Change Conference](#), May 16-17, 2023, in Atlanta Georgia. It’s the nation’s only professional learning event designed exclusively for instructional and leadership coaches, regardless of grade level.



Get in the game and join us for powerful presentations, breakout sessions and networking. You’ll have an opportunity to share your experiences and gain strategies for enhancing the impact of your coaching.

Attendees will explore how to build strong teams, plan for success, trust the process, overcome adversity and sustain change.

Cost: \$395

Registration Deadline: March 15, 2023.
Space is limited!

Hotel Accommodations: [Reserve a room](#) at the Georgia Tech Hotel & Conference Center. The SREB conference rate is available for May 15-17, 2023.



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