

Put a Little Joy in Your Teaching

What We Can Learn from the Special Education Resource Teacher

Jim Linsell

Joy Walczak, a special education resource teacher, has taught me a lot in the past eight years. I teach 5th and 6th grade language arts and social studies at Eastern Elementary School in Traverse City, Mich. Joy, also my classroom coteacher, works with me and my homeroom students, some of whom qualify for special education services

As another school year begins, new and veteran teachers alike have a lot to learn from their special education resource room teacher-consultants. Here are a few things I've learned from Joy over the years.

Language counts. Students are students. Put any modifier second. Say "I have a student who is learning disabled," for example. Don't say "I have a learning-disabled student." It's a little thing, but avoiding labels helps to ensure that a child is not defined by her disability alone.

Early success matters. It's the student's job to succeed, but it's our job as teachers to set them up to succeed. We can do this by making accommodations for our students with special needs. These accommodations can include shortening assignments, extending time lines, breaking big projects into smaller steps, assigning study partners or forming small groups, writing alternate test or quiz forms with accompanying study sheets, and providing students with assignments geared to their learning levels and reflective of their intelligence strengths. By the end of the first two weeks of school, *all* of your students should be able to say, "I like school because my teacher helps me succeed." What's more, no matter how challenging some behavior or lack of student progress may be, it's your job to celebrate your students' work—with them and with others, in public.

Feedback is important. If we want students to succeed, we must give them specific information about their performance. When your students are successful, tell them specifically what they did that led to that success. Let your students give each other constructive and positive feedback. In addition to feedback, help students learn to identify "quality" work. Work with students to write assignment rubrics. Show examples, and ask students to tell you or the class why a project was of good quality. Finally, give students a chance to use the feedback and models of quality to improve on past performance.



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Structure, routines, and predictability make a difference. Learners become self-directed, secure, and happy when they know how they should move through the school day. Start and end your class periods in much the same way each day. Strive for smooth and relaxed transitions from one activity to another. Communicate your expectations about classroom procedures and standards for behavior. Be nice, but clear about how students should accomplish daily tasks, such as taking attendance, leaving the room, and turning in work. With younger students, practice the actions until the kids can do them efficiently without prompting. Anticipate tough days—such as the day before winter and spring breaks—and stick to the routine on those days as much as possible.

Communicating with others is wise. It's your job to keep everyone in the school informed about successful accommodations, behavior plans, and parent needs. Often it's daily word-of-mouth contact with the other adults in the school that keeps them up-to-date and helps to provide a consistent pattern of success for your students.

Keeping the lines of communication open also helps ensure that students with special needs receive assistance from several service providers. It's still common, even in inclusive settings, for students to be pulled out of the general education classroom for occupational and physical therapy, as well as for speech and language remediation. Be a team player and help create a schedule that works well for your students, other service providers, and you.

Remember to be a good partner to your special education coteacher. Provide her with lots of advance notice of big assignments, tests, and quizzes. Whenever I see Joy, for example, I tell her what we're working on in class. I put copies of assignment sheets in her mailbox. I seek her input on assignments as I write them and give her weekly feedback about the kids we share. I tell Joy about our kids' successes, small or large. She has a really tough job and needs encouragement, too.

Hard as they try, some of our college and university teacher education programs don't address the nuts-and-bolts strategies that regular education teachers need to succeed with all students. If you are a special education teacher, I am grateful for the important job you do. Teach the rest of us your techniques.

If you are a regular education teacher, find your "Joy" and make her your friend. Bring her into your classroom and learn from her. It's our job to help all students succeed, and we can't do it alone.

Jim Linsell (linsellja@eastern.tcaps.net) returned to the classroom eight years ago after serving as an elementary principal for seven years. He was Michigan's 2001–02 Teacher of the Year. Joy Walczak has taught special education classes for 20 years at all levels—preschool to high school. She specializes in working with students with learning disabilities, emotional impairment, and preprimary impairment.
