Lansing School District Improves Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

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When Stacy Ellis began her career as a speech pathologist more than a decade ago, including students with disabilities in the general education classroom looked very different from what it looks like today.

“Inclusion meant joining students together in very short amounts of time a few times a year for things such as field trips or school-wide events,” says Ellis, who works in the Lansing School District.

Things have changed a lot in the past ten years. Today, Ellis is happy to see students with and without disabilities in the same classroom for the majority of each school day. But even up until early 2013, only 32 percent of students with disabilities in the Lansing School District spent at least 80 percent of their day in general education classes.

Thanks to a partnership with Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START), over the past two years, the district has more than doubled its percentage of students with disabilities, including students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), who spend at least 80 percent of their day in general education classes.

One initiative that helped the Lansing School District boost its supports for students with ASD and related disabilities was START’s K-12 Intensive Training. During the 2012-2013 school year, the district created multidisciplinary teams comprising teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, and psychologists. Members of each team represented all of the district’s schools, ensuring that at least three staff members in each building have gone through the training program.

Through the two-year training, the teams deepened their understanding of autism, behavior and educational supports, and more. They then began working collaboratively within the district to implement new support strategies.

During the same school year, all school administrators attended the START Administrator Module, which provides a fast-paced overview of information covered in
the K-12 Intensive Training and lays a foundation for new policies that will better support students with ASD.

The district didn’t stop there. A few Lansing schools have brought START in for additional professional development opportunities, and the district currently has six staff members who are START trainers. These trainers are on hand to provide mini-trainings within their buildings and larger-scale trainings for classroom assistants and other support staff throughout the district. The trainers also assist Ingham Intermediate School District (ISD), which oversees the Lansing School District, with trainings throughout the school year.

The Lansing School District’s training and hard work has paid off. Today, 66 percent of students with ASD or other disabilities in the Lansing School District spend at least 80 percent of their day in general education classes.

“My idea of successful inclusion is when a stranger walks into the room and sees a class of students, not a class of general education students with a few special education students,” says Ellis.

Several schools in the Lansing School District have boosted inclusion by adopting START’s LINK Peer to Peer program. The LINK program provides an opportunity for students who have ASD to pair up and interact with general education students throughout the day.

Everett High School adopted the program three years ago and hired a Peer to Peer coordinator to provide support for all participating schools in the district. Everett has 82 general education peers who support 35 students with special needs. For students in the LINK program, hanging out together is natural. They attend school football games together, eating pizza beforehand and then braving the cold to cheer on the Everett Vikings. They also threw a Halloween party where they had a great time playing games, learning dance moves, and eating tons of junk food.

“Students learn from watching and interacting with other students, especially skills that adults don’t understand, like video games, current lingo, and trendy TV shows. When I see all students interacting together in school, I feel that this is the best indicator of a school’s use of inclusion,” says Ellis.

Abby Nowiski, who is also a speech pathologist in the district, agrees. Although she has formal training in helping students develop speech and language skills, the true communication and socialization experts, she says, are the students’ classmates.

“By being in the general education classroom, students with autism have many models for language and social skills,” says Nowiski. “Most importantly, they have peers to practice the skills with. I have seen students with autism quickly stop screaming when a
peer shows them how to perform a task, even after I had already explained it. Students will also request things from peers that they wouldn't request from a therapist, like a different bean bag during reading.”

Overall, partnering with START has helped staff members and students in the Lansing School District embrace all students with ASD within general education classrooms. Some teachers even specifically ask to have students with ASD placed in their classrooms.

One teacher, Lore Resch, instructs students with ASD in grades 5-7 at Gardner Academy in Lansing. It’s obvious to Resch that inclusive practices benefit all students—not just students with disabilities.

“When all of the students are together, it is clear that they are all part of the same class. They hear the same rules, lessons, and expectations,” says Resch. “The students see each other’s strengths and weaknesses and experience the fact that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Through this experience, every student is better able to accept differences, which is positive for everyone.”