

Co-teaching takes off in St. Cloud school district

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In Eric Wilcox's classroom at Lincoln Elementary School, the fourth-grade teacher is joined for about an hour each morning by Amanda Musolino, a special-education teacher.

Wilcox talks about the reading lesson and then says, "I'm going to turn it over to Miss Musolino." She addresses the class while he passes out a worksheet.

The two work in tandem as they go through the daily lessons.

The scene is showing up more often in St. Cloud school district classrooms. It's called co-teaching, and it pairs a regular education instructor with a special-education teacher for portions of a day. St. Cloud and a number of other Central Minnesota districts are using co-teaching strategies with student teachers from St. Cloud State University and veteran teachers with good results so far.

Co-teaching, which dates to the 1970s when special-education laws passed that required students be taught in the least restrictive environment, is taking off again.

It offers several advantages, St. Cloud school officials said. It provides personalized instruction directed at the student's ability level. It keeps special-education students in the regular classrooms, rather than pulling them out for individual or group instruction and allows them to access the same lessons as other students. It also increases the number of adults who work with students.

"Co-teaching helps us," said Julia Espe, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment. "It really is a districtwide direction we are trying to reach."

St. Cloud State's education department is in the middle of a five-year grant to study co-teaching.

The school pairs student teachers with veterans in a number of districts including St. Cloud, Rocori, Sartell-St. Stephen, Rocori, Becker and Big Lake, said Nancy Bacharach, director of teacher quality enhancement at St. Cloud State and a professor in teacher development who has taught co-teaching strategies.

"These strategies can be used with any other adults in the classroom," Bacharach said. "I don't think it is rocket science, it is more adults in a classroom to help children."

Different ways

Co-teaching plays out differently in the classroom depending on the teacher and the needs of the students. Musolino works with 10 special education students at Lincoln. She moves from room to room during the day, pairing up with regular education teachers, working to help meet the goals of her students and the others.

"It looks different in every classroom," Musolino said.

St. Cloud school district has made a push toward co-teaching as a way to improve student learning and test scores. Every St. Cloud school has some form of co-teaching, Espe said. A two-day seminar is planned in June to expose co-teaching to more teachers.

Musolino, who is in her first year teaching full time in St. Cloud and was trained on the concept at Syracuse University, said co-teaching shows some promise in improving student learning. She spends 8:45-9:30 a.m. in Wilcox's room. Her main responsibility is to provide for the needs of special education students.

"It think it's always great when I'm here, I can float. I can answers questions," Musolino said.

Musolino said it's a challenge for teachers who are by themselves to give students the attention they need.

"If you have one adult and 25 children, it is a lot more difficult to manage what happens," she said.

Musolino and Wilcox spend some of their own time preparing for the day. They say it's important to plan.

"One obstacle is the lack of planning time," Wilcox said.

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At Kennedy, four grades and as many as seven classrooms use co-teaching. Principal Diane Moeller said the district had test scores that showed that despite putting a lot of attention into special education students, they were not faring as well as hoped on the state tests.

The students have been enthusiastic about staying in their regular classroom, she said.

"The children do feel more of a part of the classroom," Moeller said,

Early results show co-teaching is having some success, Espe said. She said teachers are enjoying working with colleagues. Students appear to like having the additional attention and are performing better, she said.

"It not only benefits the student, it benefits in professional development for the teacher. They can learn from each other," Espe said.

Better learning

St. Cloud State has studies that show students who are in a co-teaching class are doing better on state reading tests.

In 2006-07, 75 percent of students who were co-taught passed state reading tests compared with 64 percent of those not in a co-teaching environment. In math, 69 percent in co-teaching passed, compared with 61 percent not in co-teaching, according to St. Cloud State.

Wilcox said having the second teacher helps. Musolino might be able to connect with a student while he may not, he said.

"We are just basically taking what we have and try to give as much individual attention as we can," Wilcox said.

At Kennedy, Pat Forte teaches a math class with three special education teachers. They break into small groups and allow the students to seek the group that best fits their needs at the time.

One group might be moving faster than the others or focusing on something more specific.

"I really feel the children can grasp the concepts they are taught and can apply them," said Forte, who has taught for 19 years. "It is a very nonthreatening environment. What I like about it is having experienced teachers as well; you can rely on their expertise and things that have worked in given areas."

