

Building Stronger Students through Cooperation and Collaboration

By Jennifer Wagner

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” - Helen Keller. As an educator, my goal is to not only provide a quality education for my students, but to also provide an environment for them in which they feel safe, loved, and supported. This feeling of safety begins in my classroom, but extends to other areas of the school, as well. Teaching is not about being on an island, rather it is a collaborative effort of many teachers and support staff working together to ensure their students are learning in a fun, safe, supported environment.

For many children, school is the only safe place they encounter during the day. Since we do not know the exact home life of each student, educators must ensure the students are receiving adequate love and support from the school. When students enter my classroom, they are greeted into a physical environment that is neat, clean, and tidy. Creating a space that lacks chaos will help students feel more secure in their surroundings. Students are greeted by name. They are greeted with a smile and maybe a hug, high five, or fist bump, depending on their comfort level. Students will always feel loved and cherished in my classroom. This is one small thing I can do for my students to help them feel safe at school.

In order to support my students' academic learning, collaboration is key. A student's academic success relies on not only test scores, but also an evaluation from their classroom teacher. As a Special Education teacher, meeting and collaborating with the child's regular teacher helps me gain a better understanding of his or her needs and abilities. This not only allows me to provide support during pull out times, but also helps me better assist the classroom teacher in co-teaching opportunities.

One example of this happened recently. One of my students does well in class, but does not like going to P.E. His teacher told me he cries before school, cries in the morning, cries when he's walking to P.E., and cries all through the class. After talking with the teacher, I decided to observe the student in P.E. I talked with the child that morning and told him I was going to walk him to P.E. that day. When the time came, he held my hand down the hall, all the way to the gym. We chatted about life. He told me he "likes me," then he walked into the gym. He was fine when he went in. He walked right up to the circle to participate. Once the teacher started the music, he started crying. He went to the teacher and refused to participate in the actions. I went over to him, took his hands, and lead him to the bleachers. After much prompting, I was finally able to get him to tell me that the music was "too loud." We got him a pair of headphones, and he willingly returned to class.

After several minutes of observation, I had to leave to work with another student. I spoke with his class's instructional assistant later that day. She said he started crying again after I left. The next morning, I caught the P.E. teacher. We talked at length about the class. I asked about her schedule, what she did, what was happening when he started crying again, and some other questions. We determined the cause of the crying was his uneasiness of the skill he was learning. The P.E. teacher agreed to pre-teach new skills to the student the morning of P.E.

This past week was our first experience with P.E. since the last incident. The P.E. teacher was amazing. She went to his classroom first thing in the morning to take him to the gym by himself. She worked with him on dribbling and passing a basketball. She spent about 10 minutes with him. That afternoon when he went to P.E., I stood outside the gym to observe him from a distance. The class was flawless! This little boy participated, was engaged, and did not hesitate to join in on the new skills learned. This was the first class since the beginning of

the school year that he has not cried. We will continue this process to see if his confidence grows!

This is one example of several that I have had since beginning my career as a special education teacher at Anne Mason Elementary. Since I have arrived, I have met with teachers, paraprofessionals, instructional assistants, and other special education teachers to evaluate and analyze the needs of my students. I have been at the school for a month, and I have a student who can now use a computer for the first time, a student who has perfect handwriting and better behavior than ever before, and am working with a teacher on getting a student to begin following directions using visual prompts.

Without the support and collaboration with classroom teachers and others in the classroom, these improvements would not be possible. I observe and help my students as best I can, but the classroom teacher is much more knowledgeable of the students' needs and abilities. Learning to ask the right questions and analyze student situations and abilities has become an invaluable tool to me. I am excited to continue in my career as a special education teacher and see the growth in my sweet students!