

Katie Hill, Eastern NC—Middle School Self-contained Special Education

Three weeks before the start of her second year teaching, Katie Hill found that her placement would change from teaching a resource classroom to that of a completely self-contained classroom for sixth, seventh and eighth grade students with significant cognitive delays – their IQ scores were in the 30s and 40s. To compound the challenge that lay ahead of her, she did not have access to a single IEP before the start of the school year since all of the students that she would have would be new to the school.

Before the first day of school, Katie began researching what kinds of goals might be appropriate for students with such cognitive delays. She began by studying the state's alternative learning standards for children in special education. These are learning standards for the very small fraction of students (1-2 percent of all students, or 10-20 percent of students with disabilities) who are exempt from state testing requirements. Because she considered those standards to be insufficiently rigorous, Katie supplemented her understanding of those alternative standards with a deep engagement of the general education standards for Pre-K through third grade, since she knew it was likely that her students would be low-functioning in terms of literacy and math and she needed to understand how the foundational learning goals all fit together.

When her students walked into her room, she found that they were reading, on average, at a late kindergarten level. Some, but not all, of her students knew the letters of the alphabet but could only give the sounds of about 70 percent of the letters. None of her students could rhyme words. None could tell time. Some were able to identify different coins but none could compare their values. Many did not understand the concept of subtraction. In addition, they struggled with many functional skills that would be essential to independent living—for example, many of her students were unable to give personal information such as their parent/guardian's name, their phone number, their address, or their lunch identification number, and two weeks into school, none were able to navigate the building to reach places such as the cafeteria, the gym, the restrooms, or the main office.

Although no one seemed to expect her students to achieve much academic growth, Katie set ambitious goals: each student would grow 1.5 grade levels in reading and achieve 95% mastery of their IEP goals, which, in partnership with her students' parents, she carefully designed to move them toward the ultimate long-term goal of independent living and structured employment.

According to Katie, the low expectations for her students were even more significant challenges than the students' cognitive disabilities. Her students were seen by many as unable to learn basic academic and functional skills and incapable of ever living independently—and her students had internalized the low expectations around them:

The culture of special education services in my placement school is not one of achievement or high expectations, but rather students with exceptionalities are expected to be low-performing students with significant behavioral problems. The stigma of receiving special education services leaves students feeling that they have no choice but to cause problems and perpetuate the educational gap between themselves and regular education students. . . . I have often found that the single biggest

factor blocking my students from reaching their full academic gains is the prevailing ideology that they won't be able to achieve.

Katie was determined, however, to ensure that her students would attain significant gains in the knowledge, skills, and sense of self-efficacy and self-advocacy they would need for successful independent living. In addition to carefully differentiating her instruction, maintaining a laser-like focus on each student's individual goals, and working extremely hard, she deliberately worked to build her students' sense of self-efficacy:

Every day, I show my students how far they have come, and how far they have to go to achieve their goals. Under no circumstances do I accept a child saying that they can't or that something is too hard, and instead I constantly remind them of the successes they have already achieved.

Another challenge Katie faced was a shortage of resources. Due to their unique disabilities, Katie's students required specific resources that were "unfortunately completely unavailable in a school that does not have adequate resources to provide textbooks to all of the regular education students." Undeterred, Katie found ways to obtain such resources, including convincing her principal and the county's director of special education to provide close to 150 books that were on the reading levels of her students yet still of high interest for her adolescent readers.

Throughout the year, Katie built and sustained momentum by maintaining close contact with her students' families. She sent biweekly notes home accompanied by student work, distributed monthly classroom newspapers highlighting exciting things they were doing as a group, and talked to each student's parents at least once per week through a phone call or home visit. She also invited parents into school at least once a month to read with their child, to join them for lunch, or to accompany them on Community Interaction Activities—activities, such as going shopping or visiting the local recreation center, that clearly addressed her students' transitional goals of needing to live and function independently in a community. Over the course of the year, her students' parents became increasingly excited about the progress of their children, who had made so little progress for so many years.

Katie poured tremendous energy into differentiating her instruction to best fit the strengths, learning styles and needs of each of her individual students. In a classroom where repeated exposure was the key to success, she worked hard to create dynamic, creative and varied lessons that held the students' interest and helped them master a skill or concept. She developed innovative, authentic assessments that reflected the real-world situations they could easily and regularly encounter as independent adults. She constantly monitored each student's understanding, confidence, and engagement and responded to them quickly and flexibly.

By the end of the year, her students made, on average, 1.6 years' worth of reading growth and approximately three years of growth in math. They also mastered 83 percent of the grade level standards they were shooting for as a class, and all students achieved their IEP goals. Under her leadership, in one year her students made more academic progress than they had in their previous six to eight years combined.