

Rockford Students with Disabilities Achieve Success with Hands-On Learning

Introduction

The third largest school district in the state of Illinois, Rockford Public School District 205 is home to 29,484 students in grades PreK-12. Some 15% of its student population is eligible for special needs services. Centrally located in the northern part of the state, the largely urban/suburban district is culturally diverse, with 74% of student families falling into the low income area.

Challenges

In Feb., 2010, District 205 sought a better, more effective way to teach students with disabilities. The needs among this student group are diverse – from profound to moderately impaired and autistic -- so it was essential to find resources that would support, engage, and inspire a very unique group of learners. Additionally, the district wanted to align all special ed teacher resources so that students would be able to seamlessly advance and build their skills through familiar programs.

Implementation

ETA/Cuisenaire was recommended by one of District 205's math coordinators as an excellent resource for hands-on special ed products and professional development support. The company had previously implemented a very successful Algebra program with District 205 high schools and was well-known as

a dedicated, results-driven solutions provider.

ETA/Cuisenaire met with the District's Director of Special Education to observe several different special ed classrooms. Together they determined key areas to be addressed. Support was needed with strategic classroom instructional management to engage their students with disabilities in whole group, small group, and individualized independent teaching and learning.



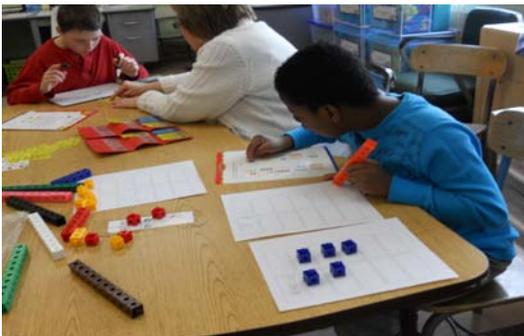
Students practice time and money skills with VersaTiles.

From this initial assessment, several hands-on resources were recommended as solutions that would best focus on the required skill development in math, science, and reading, as well as readily mesh with the varied needs of the students with special needs. These included ETA/Cuisenaire® exclusive resources Hands-On Standards®, Deluxe

Edition, for whole group math and science instruction; Reading Rods® manipulatives for whole group literacy instruction; CenterStage® Literacy and CenterStage® Math for small group lessons; VersaTiles® for self-correcting independent skills practices in all three subjects; and CitySteps® for Math and Literacy to promote skill practice among preschoolers.

Following implementation of a paid pilot program with eight special ed teachers from diverse classes, additional ETA/Cuisenaire resources were suggested, including Vocabulary Visits® for both whole class and small group reading and comprehension; Writing Destinations® to strengthen writing and vocabulary skills; and the Radius™ interactive audio learning system to build knowledge of key math, science, and literacy skills.

“In each case,” says ETA/Cuisenaire’s Educational Consultant Barbara Jo Evans, “we recommended the materials bearing in mind that we wanted the special ed teachers to use common resources so that as the students advance, they are familiar with like materials and a common vocabulary that is instantly recognizable. Plus, the teachers would have a common ground



The hands-on lessons of CenterStage Math were a hit with students.

to facilitate both horizontal and vertical planning. These are very important considerations when working with children with special needs.”

Throughout the program, ETA/Cuisenaire provided teacher training and professional development assistance, as well as regular classroom visits by Barbara Jo Evans for sustained collaborative support and help with program implementation.

The pilot program was a resounding success, with 100% of the teachers ranking their experience as “good” or “excellent.” Collectively, they offered three major reasons for their satisfaction:

- 1.** The products encompassed all aspects of learning for children at every level, in addition to reinforcing present knowledge.
- 2.** Common resources will allow students to keep building on previous, familiar knowledge as they advance through grade levels.
- 3.** Students were excited and motivated to learn by the variety of engaging, hands-on activities.

Why do a pilot? “This was a very large undertaking for a very special group of students,” explains Barbara Jo. “And, we introduced a wide variety of hands-on resources – many different products with many different applications. It was essential for the District to know that this was going to be the program that would indeed deliver the results they were looking for before they made a commitment. We wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.”



Students had fun understanding the importance of learning to tell time.

Following the successful pilot, District 205 made the commitment for a total adoption of ETA/Cuisenaire resources for *all* of its special ed classrooms. Along with the already-recommended programs, additional materials were purchased to fill spot needs throughout the 25 designated special ed classrooms.

Reflections

How did the District 205 special ed teachers feel about the success of the new program? Here's what some of them had to say:

“All of my students were excited and very motivated to learn VersaTiles. They were grouped according to ability and no one felt as if they were in a low group because all the work looks the same. They were all working on the same thing at the same time, but each actually working on the specific skills they personally needed. Before it was very hard for me to assess the skills of some of my nonverbal students, but VersaTiles makes it easy. Now, when I tell my students to get into their groups for VersaTiles, they get really excited!”

■ **Janelle Williford**
High School Special Ed

“My students were all very engaged in the activities and were able to talk together about the lessons. It was exciting to watch them have fun and learn in a small, supportive group. They are very happy to use the new materials.”

■ **Lisa Smith**
Early Elementary Special Ed

“The products encompass all aspects of learning for our students and reinforce present knowledge, and they are also very easy for them to use independently. I am very appreciative of the partnership we have with ETA/Cuisenaire. It has allowed us to really understand how to use the materials in the best possible way to benefit our students.”

■ **Rissa Spangler**
Middle School Special Ed Teacher and Golden Apple Award Winner

Conclusion



Teachers and students work together on word-recognition and reading skills with colorful Reading Rods.

District 205's special ed adoption program continues to be a success, with 40 schools now participating in some way. Professional development and

classroom support is ongoing, with ETA/Cuisenaire providing regularly scheduled visits to the District and on-demand help whenever it is needed.

It's that dedicated partnership between ETA/Cuisenaire and District 205 that has been the foundation for the success of this program. ETA/Cuisenaire was committed to providing the best hands-on customer solutions and assisting the District in achieving its immediate and long-term goals, while in turn, District 205 made the commitment to learn and understand exactly how to utilize the resources and implement the most effective education processes for this very special student group.

Several factors contributed to such positive results:

- * Understanding of students with special needs and the different ways they learn and comprehend
- * Identification of the best products to achieve the desired results
- * Pilot program to assure all needs and issues were addressed and in line with the goals of the program
- * Extensive, on-going teacher training and classroom support
- * Dedicated commitment of the special ed director, the teacher team, and the ETA/Cuisenaire Educational Consultant

Debbi Johnson, Rockford's Special Education Assistant Principal, sums it up best when she says: "My first passion in Special Education has always been for the students with the most significant needs. Historically, it was difficult, if not impossible, to find age-appropriate content materials that were meaningful and from which these students could learn and build concept understanding. Core content materials were almost

impossible to locate. With the new ETA/Cuisenaire materials, our teachers are able to instruct students using a wide variety of educational fun materials that are in the core content areas with both age-appropriate standards and activities. All materials and activities are highly organized and can be easily put together for specific lessons. The materials are used from pre-school through grade 12 so students are able to build upon their skills throughout their educational career. ETA has provided us with a comprehensive program for our most involved students to assist them in reaching their fullest potential. Having the ETA coaches come into our classrooms, observe lessons, and provide feedback has been invaluable to the continuing professional development of our teachers."

The Mission Statement of Rockford Public Schools District 205 emphasizes its commitment to "creating dynamic, integrated learning environments that respond to the needs and aspirations of the individual student in partnership with family and community." The journey to find the best answers for the best education of special needs children is an ongoing effort to achieve that goal – an effort with an intent that is crystal clear.

A multi-year training and class observation plan is in place for what is now an all-district adoption program. Thanks to a dedicated team of educators armed with a true understanding of unique student needs and the foresight to choose the best tools to meet the challenge, the journey ahead is bright with the promise that student lives will be forever enriched. * *ETA/Cuisenaire*
500 Greenview Court Vernon Hills, IL 60061

