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Special ed takes on new meaning during pandemic

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

The COVID-19 pandemic put teachers in the unique position of having to virtually teach for the last two-and-a-half months. Earlier this week, Salem-Keizer educators wrapped up their final distance learning lessons for the 2019-20 school year.

While giving virtual instruction has provided new challenges for Salem-Keizer educators, teachers that work in special education classrooms were presented with a greater task in trying to meet the needs of their students that are on Individualized Learning Plans (IEP's).

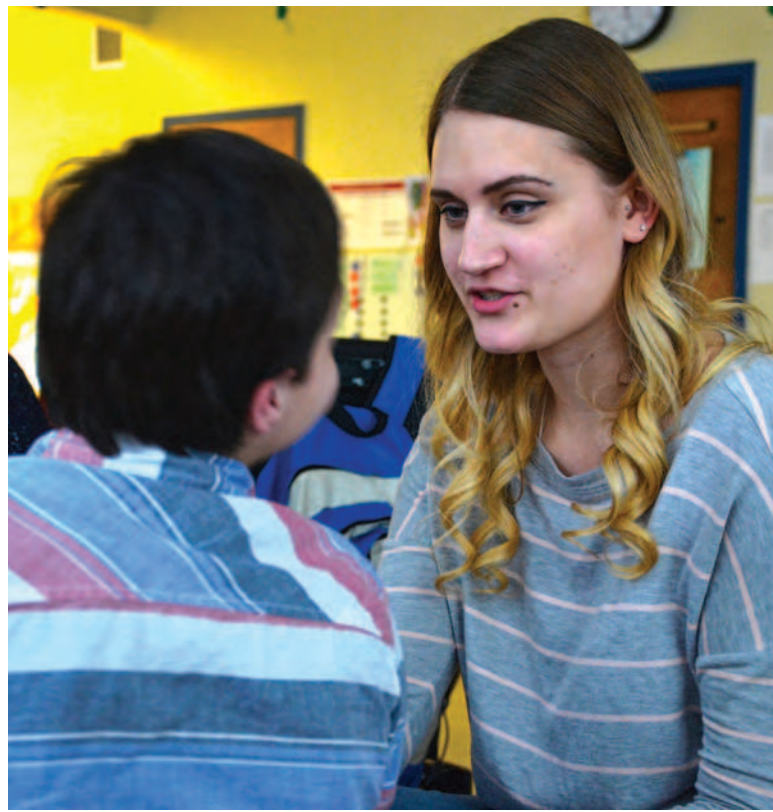
"It has been hard not having the ability to address needs with students as they come up, especially the social/emotional needs that many of our students have. For some of us, talking on

the phone doesn't feel the same as a face-to-face conversation, so I never know if I have helped enough or need to offer more supports," said Nicole De Blasi, a special education instructor at McNary High.

"This has definitely opened my eyes to the art of special education. It makes us, as a staff, rethink what the academic needs are and how we can best serve our students," first-year special education teacher Kelly Burdick said.

However, the staff at McNary has been diligent in making sure that special education students are having their needs met.

"Our number one concern as we transitioned to distance learning was to provide care and connection for all our students. Through our care and connection, we continued to



File Sofia Boru works with a student in the Celtic emotional growth center in 2018.

offer academic and emotional supports by supporting and collaborating with our students, general education teachers and

parents," De Blasi said.

Most of the specialized instruction for special education is via small group learning on Google Meets. Teachers also have been providing their students with individual check-ins through phone calls, emails or texts — whatever the student's preferred method of communication is.

All students that are on an IEP have a case manager who is there to make sure that all of the student's services and supports are in place. According to De Blasi, the case managers that work with McNary special

education students know their students so well, that the staff was able to quickly adjust teaching and offer a variety of supports to make sure that the individual needs of the students were met.

"Our goal has always been to make sure that our student can continue to access their general education classes despite the new methods of teaching. We want all students to continue to feel included, have access and feel successful," De Blasi said.

However, lack of personal connection and internet access are two of the main things that contributed to some of the troubles when it came to distance teaching.

"So many students have challenges in their home life that make distance learning, at times, impossible for them. Despite trying our best, there are students who find this type of learning challenging," De Blasi said. "Some students really need that face-to-face interaction and not being able to pop into a classroom for support has been difficult. Students now have to call, email or wait for office hours to get help, as opposed to having easy access to their teacher for immediate support."

"We have a lot less control

over the environment," Burdick added. "We didn't have a way to bring our kids that personal connection."

While distance learning has been a struggle for some students, others are actually finding more success under this strategy — to the point that the special education department wants to implement distance-learning strategies in the future for certain students, even when in-person class is back in session.

"Many students struggle with large classes and this type of learning is great for them. Many of my students are thriving by working independently and knowing that learning can be done in their own safe space," De Blasi said.

Teachers have also seen the development of social skills in their students through this process.

"We have realized that a lot of our kids learn better this way. It's been amazing to see some of our kids working on social skills that we weren't seeing in the school building," Burdick said.

De Blasi credits, not just the special education teachers, but the entire staff at McNary for some of the positive results that they saw through virtual learning.

"It has been absolutely impressive and humbling at the lengths our staff will go to, to make sure all students are getting the help and care that they need," De Blasi said. "Teachers, counselors, and staff are reaching out to students at all times to give them the help they need and make sure that they know we are all in this together and will get through this together. I feel very fortunate and lucky to work with such an amazing team."

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