

Unlocking the learning

Program helps special kids

BY LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

Some days teacher Cindy Kacin is a learning locksmith. Kacin is a teacher in a district-wide program for learning disabilities, which includes 10 pupils in grades three through five at Flanders Elementary. A lower elementary program for kindergartners through grade three is headed by Nancy Brodrick at Forest Elementary.

The students may have a difficult time with traditional tasks such as reading, writing or remembering certain things.

"It's very challenging to try and learn how any particular child learns; each child is so different," Kacin said. "It's rewarding when you can find a key. It's like you have a wad of keys and you're always wondering, 'Which key is going to unlock their mind so they're going to learn this?'"

Added Brodrick, who's taught children with learning disabilities for more than 20 years: "I feel many times, I'm filling in the gaps. There's a missing link somewhere and I help find it and I'm helping them move on."

The goal of the learning dis-

abled program is to get the students in a regular classroom setting. There are success stories.

One child went from the program at Flanders to one for gifted students at Eaglo Elementary. Some 25 percent of the kids will move on to the resource room, where they're able to be periodically "mainstreamed" into a regular classroom setting.

The other 75 percent, though, will need support the rest of their academic life.

Sometimes the support takes the form of unorthodox methods.

On this day, Kacin becomes a caller in a reading bingo game. Instead of numbers, she calls out words. The children identify the ones listed on their cards.

In another instance, she draws roofs over columns in a math equation. Pupils are told they need to borrow cookies from the neighbor on the left to understand subtraction.

Then there's "belly spelling," in which students each take a letter and then stand together to spell a word.

One time, Kacin asked a child who was having difficulty pronouncing words to picture them as being on a slide flowing downward.

Compensating techniques for learning disabilities have evolved. So, too, have the teaching tools.

Computer software has been developed for children with visual and perceptual problems. For ex-

ample, for those who have difficulty handwriting, there's a program that allows them to draw with their fingers.

In the past, learning disabled has also meant dealing with misconceptions. One of the most common is that they're slow. "I think other children tend not to understand some of the problems these children have, that these children have average or above average intelligence," Brodrick said. "... (The students) may just not pick it up with conventional learning methods."

Once in awhile there's teasing on the playground. Kacin said it might mean she'll go into a regular classroom and talk with kids.

Otherwise, there's few problems. "They're never next to a child who has finished a test in 10 minutes and they're still on problem three," she said. "All their work is geared for what they can do. They're always in a win-win situation."

"They share in each other's victories. They wouldn't get that in other classrooms..."

Kacin marvels at how bright the children are in other ways.

"Some have a keen insight into social things. They'll see a situation involving other kids in the classroom and they will come up and tell me about it. They'll really know what the motives were."

"That takes a high degree of intelligence."



Special project: Above, Students Korrin Edwards (left) and Leslie Chaston work with teacher Cindy Kacin at Flanders Elementary. At left, Carol Azar plays word games with Korrin Edwards (left) and Melissa Sutton.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SHARON LESCHER

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