



OCTOBER 2024

# UNITY SPECIAL EDUCATION BOARD REPORT



## FINDING COOPER'S VOICE

Unity alum Kate Swenson has engaged audiences around the country with her stories about special needs parenting, motherhood, and finding herself after her son's autism diagnosis. During the Teacher Inservice on October 21st, Kate is returning to Unity and will share her message with district staff.

Kate is the creator of the widely-read blog *\*Finding Cooper's Voice\**, which has supported countless parents of children and teachers of students with autism. In her powerful memoir, *\*Forever Boy\**, Kate shares her journey of motherhood and unconditional love following her son Cooper's diagnosis of severe, nonverbal autism.

Initially overwhelmed by grief and the challenges of advocating for her child, Kate's transformative journey led her to discover that her path to acceptance involved her own personal growth. While her dreams of a perfect family were shattered, through resilience and hard work, she learned that joy and fulfillment are still possible. Kate openly shares her experiences and insights, providing hope and encouragement to those facing similar challenges.

We are eager to hear Kate's story and the valuable lessons she has gained, as we aim to apply her experiences to our students at Unity School District.



School Districts are seeking ways to recruit, train, and keep special education teachers and related service providers. Wisconsin is among 48 states experiencing shortages in these roles, according to a report by Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Tomas (2016). The Special Education Team at the Department of Public Instruction and CESA II has prioritized staffing shortages and created a New Teacher Induction program designed to support and retain special educators.

High School teacher, Elli Garvey, is participating in this program that includes six" professional learning sessions led by trained specialists, focusing on high-leverage instructional practices and compliance in special education. Topics include creating positive learning environments, explicit instruction, student engagement, social-emotional skills, collaboration, data-driven planning, as well as IEP development and meeting facilitation. Additionally, participants receive at least six coaching sessions from trained coaches to enhance their understanding of the content.



During the 2024-25 school year, 50% of parents with children receiving special education preschool services at Unity participated in the Family Engagement Survey. We are pleased to report that 100% of respondents described our school as a welcoming environment where they feel like equal partners. Parents appreciated the school's approach, noting that staff provided support for their children's needs, presented information in an accessible manner, fostered an inclusive setting, and made families feel valued and accepted.

Parents also expressed satisfaction with their ability to discuss concerns and options with school staff, highlighting their genuine care for their children's future. Looking ahead, many parents expressed interest in learning more about activities and strategies to support their children outside of school at home, as well as how to connect with community services.