

# Special Education Board Report

## December 2023 Board Report

Submitted by Elizabeth Jorgensen, Director of Special Education

### Unity's Early Childhood Education Program



Jace

Teddy

Children under the age of three with a disability may be provided services through a program in Polk County called Birth to Three. Before a child reaches age three, the Family and Birth to Three teams discuss and decide whether to make a referral to the school district of residence. Once referred, the child is evaluated by Unity District staff. If children meet the eligibility criteria for a disability and are found eligible for services, Unity School District begins services on the child's third birthday through the district's Early Childhood program.

Stephanie Crawford is Unity's Early Childhood Teacher. Students are best served in inclusive settings as the children make more developmental, social, emotional, and learning gains. Children without disabilities also benefit by showing positive outcomes with learning. Students without disabilities develop strong social skills, demonstrate empathy and compassion, understand differences, and gain better communication skills. Stephanie visits homes, daycares, and Head Start to provide early childhood services. She educates parents/guardians and offers resources to help them work with their children in the home setting.

Some students become "guest students" to help transition to a school setting before beginning PK. They receive services they qualify for, including Speech and Language, Physical Therapy, and Occupational Therapy while in the building. Some students also receive assistance if they are visually impaired or deaf/hard of hearing through CESA 11 consultants/teachers. In addition to seeing specialists at school, guest students may work with the early childhood teacher on a 1:1 basis and join a PK classroom setting part-time to socialize with peers of similar age and experience a classroom community.

Dan Strobach and Linda Brown are Teddy's parents. Linda shared, "Teddy lights up when he sees all the other kids each morning as he is dropped off for school, and he greets each one individually. It is so encouraging to see how receptive the other children are to him as well and how much they enjoy interacting with him. He gets many high-fives and smiles from the other kids. We are also thrilled to see Teddy participating in activities with other children in a classroom setting. It gives us great hope for his future and education. We have already seen improvements in his behavior and skills at home since he started the Early Childhood Program at Unity Elementary." Dan Strobach said, "I'm extremely pleased with the early interaction Teddy gets to have with other kids near his age. He absolutely loves hanging out with other kids, and it is really critical for him to develop social skills and routines now as early as possible so that when he enters PK, he can integrate more seamlessly into that routine."

Joe and Jennifer Gale are Jace's parents. Jennifer said, "Jace's speech has improved a lot since starting in early childhood. Interacting with peers and trained personnel has helped him get closer to grade level. He loves seeing his teachers and friends."