

Audio Transcript

Suzanne Rathbun: My ultimate goal in dealing with Bradley is that, although I feel my students require that level of emotional support, I also wanted them to have access to their home community, have access to their peers, have the ability to make connections in their home school. I met with Trish and we decided that it would be not only financially advantageous, but it would also be to the best benefit of our students to try a partnership classroom. So what we mean by that is that that Bradley classroom currently will reside in one of your school buildings so you're partnering with them, they are partnering with you, and those students are then able to be integrated into some regular ed classrooms in their own public school. They're part of their community, they're able to participate in any activities that happen after school or before school, and it's much more of a rich environment for them. But they're also receiving that social emotional support that they need from a Bradley classroom because it's housed by Bradley staff.

What's, you know, one of the greatest assets of having the partnership classroom is that our students feel connected. They feel connected, not only to the other students but also to the teachers, they don't feel shunned, they don't feel as though they're being sent away from their school to go to a more restrictive placement.

So a big piece that changed with COVID was that--and not so, I guess, not so much for the partnership in the respective pods--but, um, with the need to keep students in pods, those students had to remain in their partnership classroom without that accessibility to those regular ed classes. Which could be very difficult for a student who maybe the year before was used to going to history class and to math class is now unable to do that because we're mixing pods. So that existed, probably until I would say, April and then, once April vacation came around we were a little bit more comfortable having students go into those pods while they were wearing masks and with, you know, a far enough distance from the other students, so they were able to go back into those regular ed mainstream classes.

Lauren Krempecki: How are you measuring success for whether these partnership classrooms are working--and I'm assuming you're seeing success since you're thinking about expanding. Like, what's that measure for you?

Suzanne Rathbun: So that too is very individualized. So if I were to think-- like you can't see me smiling right now but I'm smiling thinking about particular students and the struggles that they had and how just amazingly well they're doing with the supports in place. And kids that we never thought were going to--and parents didn't think that they'd reach that, you know, piece where they were ready to graduate--they were ready to stand before teachers and present a senior project. And they're able to do that with confidence. And they're able to walk across the stage and receive their diploma. And really we know they've met with success both academically and emotionally and they're ready to kind of face the world head-on. But for every child, it's very individual. It could be the child who, you know, struggled to maintain themselves in a classroom and self-regulate for 15 minutes at a time is now going from the partnership into a regular art class all day and coming back--I mean all period rather--and coming back to the partnership and sharing, you know, her success there and it's the little things. It's really just the little things.

Lauren Krempecki: Yeah. That feels like, um, compelling evidence for educators, who get to see these students each day or even folks who are part of teams and get to kind of look at data or even just see like they're moving to a less restrictive environment and it's working for them. Was there anyone that you had to convince about this idea?

Suzanne Rathbun: Well, in the very beginning, when I presented the idea of having a partnership classroom in the high school, there were some regular ed teachers that were very nervous and uneasy about it and not understanding what it meant to them and how responsible they were going to be for the students. And they were really nervous and they had a lot of questions. And so Trish and I did, you know, a couple of presentations and we answered questions and I went to faculty meetings. And honestly, the level of support that we have now, it I can't even begin to tell you. It's immeasurable. And the principal and the

vice principal have been absolutely fantastic. And you see it. When it comes from the top down, then you really see that support. You know, our superintendent speaks so highly of the program. And our principal and our vice principal are wonderful.

We actually had a student who, about two years ago, was struggling in the program. And one of the things he really, really loved was music and playing the guitar. And he was really struggling to get his work done, and he, you know, was having some rough days where he was spending some time in the timeout room and just really, you know, needing more counseling. And the principal came down to the room and had a conversation with him and you know talked to him about music and the very next day brought in one of his hand-me-down guitars that he had been given that he fixed up and put new strings on it and gave it to this young man. And it made all the difference in the world. It was just the best connection and he was able to connect you know, on that level with music and the child you know from that point on, did so much better.

Lauren Krempecki: Um, is there anything I didn't ask or anything that you want to add, um, you know, to this recording?

Suzanne Rathbun: No. I think the only thing that, you know, and I kind of alluded to this in the beginning, is that--and this is really, you know, just a benefit. It's not actually the reason why I started the partnership. It's really a benefit of the partnership, but it is very cost effective for districts. You save so much money by keeping your children in-district, you know, you save on transportation. We get a discount on the tuition. And our students' needs are being met in their home school, in their home community. So that's just an added benefit, not a reason to do it. But certainly, if you have superintendents or school committees struggling to make the decision, this is one way to kind of push them in the right direction because they really speak to, you know, the dollar amount. So that truly has helped us because it has been cost effective.