



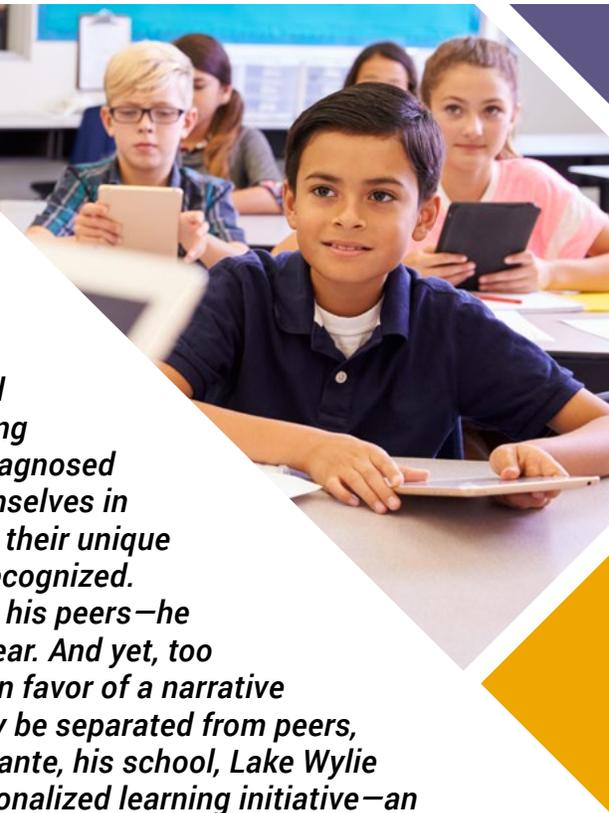
EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

LAKE WYLIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S K-1 COMBINATION CLASS

Dante Samuel¹ didn't have an easy start in life.

He was born 16 weeks premature and spent the first four months of his life in the neonatal intensive care unit, undergoing surgery to repair craniosynostosis, a condition in which one or more joints in the skull close prematurely. Challenges increased as he got older. By age 5, Dante struggled with communicating, had overall cognitive and social functioning issues, and lacked important pre-academic skills. Dante was diagnosed as developmentally delayed. Many children like Dante find themselves in schools that don't have educators who are prepared to address their unique needs. These children's unique gifts and strengths may go unrecognized. Dante is described as eager and focused, a good role model for his peers—he even received a character education award during the school year. And yet, too often, the education system can overlook strengths like these in favor of a narrative that emphasizes Dante's weaknesses. A student like Dante may be separated from peers, retained, and held back by lower expectations. But luckily for Dante, his school, Lake Wylie Elementary in Charlotte, North Carolina, is taking part in a personalized learning initiative—an effort in the Charlotte–Mecklenburg Schools that aims to address each student's needs.

At Lake Wylie, Dante attends a K–1 combination class where attention is paid to addressing his learning challenges and drawing out his interests and skills. The class is co-taught by a general education teacher, Amanda Owens, and a special educator, Rebecca Bettis, and is supported by an aide, Janeen Kirkpatrick. The teachers work with Dante and his peers to develop learning paths that engage them in demonstration of rigorous learning standards. Most importantly, Dante's learning is personalized and he is instructed in an inclusive setting—not separated from his typically developing peers. Dante's classroom of 18 students has four other students with identified disabilities and a range of other learners from typical to gifted. In his class, all the students get the same types of personalized learning opportunities. This inclusive learning environment has yielded substantial learning gains for Dante: He made 17 points of growth on the Math MAP test and 13 points of growth on the Reading MAP test. He is living up to the high expectations his family and educators hold him to.



**LAKE WYLIE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
AT A GLANCE**

Location:
Charlotte, North Carolina

of Students: **776**

of Students With Disabilities:
135

Year K-1 Inclusive Classroom
Began: **2016**

Other Grants/Funds Supporting
Work: **Regular district
allocation**

¹ In this instance and throughout the rest of the text, the student's name has been changed to protect privacy.

THE VISION: FOCUSING ON THE WHOLE CHILD THROUGH STUDENT OWNERSHIP, CHOICE, AND MASTERY

Dante's experience at Lake Wylie is not happening in isolation. It is increasingly becoming a norm in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), one of the more successful large school districts in the country. CMS initially embedded tenets of personalized learning in the district's work through its [Strategic Plan 2018](#), which emphasized the approach in a number of goals. Specifically, the district prioritized "maximizing achievement in a personalized 21st century learning environment for every child" (Goal 1) and "inspiring and nurturing learning, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship through technology and strategic school redesign" (Goal 6). When the district designed the initiative to meet these goals, personalized learning took form through [four cornerstones](#):

1. **A Focus on the Whole Child**—Drawing out students' full talents through a focus on building character, fostering relationships, and delivering supports
2. **Emphasis on Student Ownership**—Empowering students to engage in relevant, challenging learning opportunities through self-awareness, student voice, and other attributes
3. **Mastery Learning**—Providing students with clear expectations and feedback on the specific skills necessary to move to the next stage of learning
4. **Paces, Playlists, and Pathways**—Empowering students to control the speed and direction of their learning, as well as their long-term college and career goals.

This vision, which has led to improved outcomes across the district, isn't focused solely on students with disabilities. It's a vision of how learning happens for *all* students.²

Lake Wylie Elementary's principal, Brooke Hough, and her staff chose to be one of the first schools to pilot the district's personalized learning effort: They were ready to personalize instruction for students, had an interest in the strategic use of data, and believed in the need to educate the whole child. What's more, they wanted to achieve the district's vision for every child—students like Dante as well as students without disabilities.

Through the pilot, Hough learned that the type of full inclusion she had hoped for is not a natural by-product of personalized learning. Instead, it has to be intentionally included from the beginning. Certain students in the school were significantly behind their peers and needed to make a great deal of progress to catch up. As Hough thought about students like Dante, she began to struggle with the same questions many principals ask: "What do I do to help kids with disabilities? How do I support them and keep them in an inclusive setting?"

I wanted students like Dante to achieve at high levels, I wanted them to have more supports, and I wanted them to have multiple opportunities to learn with different adults."

– Brooke Hough, Lake Wylie Elementary School Principal

² For more information, go to pl.cmslearns.org.

THE STRATEGY: K-1 INCLUSIVE COMBINATION CLASS

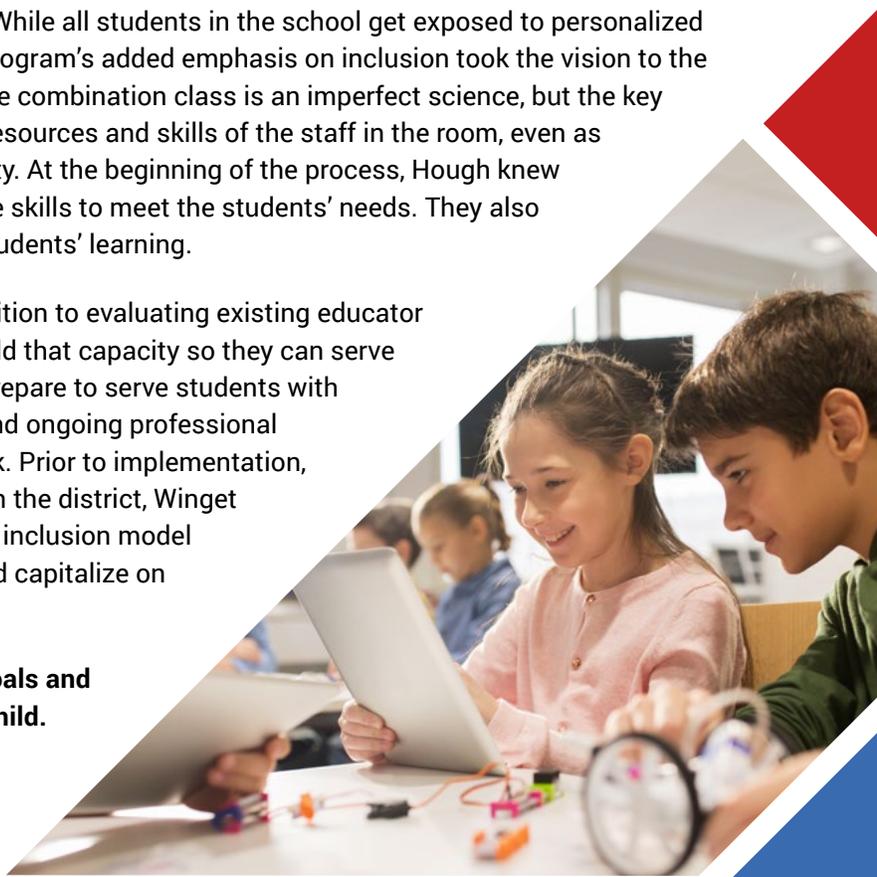
The creation of an inclusive K-1 combination class is one of the key strategies Lake Wylie Elementary has used to address the needs of all students through their whole-child model. During the 2015-16 school year, Hough and several teachers came together to create a blueprint for the class. They brought together 18 students: 13 students without identified disabilities and five students with formally identified disabilities. The teachers at Lake Wylie Elementary believe that bringing students with and without disabilities together and providing them all with differentiated instruction and supports will have a positive impact on every student's learning.

Lake Wylie Elementary staff knew that putting students with and without disabilities in the same room is not, in itself, inclusion. Owens, Bettis, and Kirkpatrick worked together to examine all 18 students' individual learning goals and designed different instructional paths to achieve those goals—this was the very essence of personalized learning. The system created at Lake Wylie has not only proven to be effective for educating all students, including those with disabilities, but has contributed to more screening and earlier identification of student needs.

IMPLEMENTING THE K-1 INCLUSIVE COMBINATION CLASS

Implementing this inclusive combination class is no small feat and the staff at Lake Wylie Elementary are continually meeting, assessing challenges and opportunities, and making mid-course corrections as necessary to improve overall implementation of the class. Five elements have guided this work and the strategy selected:

1. **Choose students who will thrive in the class.** While all students in the school get exposed to personalized learning and the four cornerstones, this pilot program's added emphasis on inclusion took the vision to the next level. Selecting which students will join the combination class is an imperfect science, but the key is to select students whose needs match the resources and skills of the staff in the room, even as efforts are put in place to build out that capacity. At the beginning of the process, Hough knew that Owens and Bettis had or could develop the skills to meet the students' needs. They also had the resources available to maximize the students' learning.
2. **Provide training on inclusive practices.** In addition to evaluating existing educator capacity, a school must also have a plan to build that capacity so they can serve their current students more effectively—and prepare to serve students with even more diverse needs in the future. Initial and ongoing professional learning has been an essential part of this work. Prior to implementation, Owens shadowed teachers at another school in the district, Winget Park Elementary, which has implemented a full inclusion model and where the teachers continue to engage and capitalize on professional learning.
3. **Working with parents and children, develop goals and plans aligned to high expectations for every child.** A key part of this model involves empowering educators to work with students and their families to ensure that each student—with



or without an IEP—has a personalized playlist that is based on the skills and strategies they need to master high standards. That includes meaningful, ambitious goals (that, if applicable, are aligned to their IEPs) and strategies to meet grade-level standards. For students with disabilities, IEP goals are part of the playlist, along with other grade-level standards. In inclusive, personalized classrooms like this combination K–1 classroom, students will be at widely varied stages of progress and will have diverse needs. The key is to not allow perceived limitations or a student’s present level of performance in any one area dictate their goals and learning paths.

4. **Invest in and facilitate instructional strategies and learning environments that meet the needs of all students.** With educator skills and plans in place, success depends on providing students—especially those with disabilities—access to resources and strategies necessary to achieve their goals. This includes incorporating the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into every facet of the classroom. Owens and Bettis provide Dante and his peers with different ways to access learning (through lecture, multisensory opportunities for practice, and technology), different means to foster engagement (through individual pathways and playlists), and multiple ways to demonstrate learning (orally, on paper, and through projects).
5. **Provide flexibility and support for staff to enable the system to work.** As the team at Lake Wylie works to turn learning into an ongoing process, they recognize that the approach is not perfect. In fact, failure and change are part of the process. At Lake Wylie Elementary, Hough works to help develop growth mindsets: Learning—even for educators—is a process, and failure can be an acceptable part of that process if it leads to creative learning and improvement.

Acceptance of failure and the ability to adapt are both important. There have been times during implementation of this initiative when Bettis and Owens have doubted both their own and their partner’s capacity to meet the full demands of inclusion for Dante and his peers. As the year has progressed, they’ve begun to see the fruits of their labor. Achievement is improving and behavioral issues are diminishing for all students in the class.



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The gains in this K–1 inclusive classroom have not been an accident—they have been born out of a capacity to take strategic risks and make adjustments as necessary to strengthen the classroom and school climate at Lake Wylie.

Key Benefits of the K–1 Personalized and Inclusive Classroom for Students With Disabilities

• **Reduced Stigma**

The inclusive classroom has built Dante’s confidence and that of his peers, reducing the potential stigma that could have resulted from being educated in a separate classroom.



• **Greater Educator Flexibility and Support**

Teachers are provided greater flexibility and support in driving student learning and can meet students’ needs in a more individualized way.

• **Social Interaction Effects**

Dante and his peers are not just benefiting academically. They are also developing many social skills they’ll need to succeed throughout their lives.

Key Challenges of the K–1 Inclusive and Personalized Approach for Students With Disabilities

• **Educator Capacity**

Reaping the benefits of inclusion requires close attention to how co-teachers are paired and how they are supported in developing the skills needed to teach in an inclusive, personalized setting.

• **Managing Variability in Learning**

Allowing flexibility and fostering greater variation in student learning can make it harder to monitor each student’s progress. Structures and resources are necessary to manage students whose learning reflects different needs, paces, and modes.

• **Challenging Interactions**

Without proper structures in place, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), the gamut of diverse needs can result in challenging social interactions that could contribute to conflict between students and their teachers.



CONCLUSION

Inclusion is a key tenet of our nation’s special education law, but it can be challenging for schools to effectively educate students with disabilities alongside their peers. Personalized learning offers an approach that honors inclusion while addressing each student’s unique needs. However, accomplishing both can be a challenge. Lake Wylie’s approach reflects a step-by-step approach to transformation: To ultimately change outcomes for students like Dante across the entire state of North Carolina, Lake Wylie is starting small. It starts with educators like Hough, Bettis, and Owens who are willing to take learning risks to show that change is possible in their classroom. From there, the model can grow within the school, across the district, and eventually across the state. It is all these actions, including setbacks and recalibrations, that lead to learning systems that prepare students like Dante for success in college, career, and life.