



Spring 2007

Bill Isler
Reports on
TALGS 2007

Notes on a
Recreational
Reading
Activity

New
Achievement
Profile:
Naomi Ossar

Being
Yourself

Exceptional
Opportunity
of the Year

Report from
Seattle:
TESOL 2007

[/Index/](#)
[/Letters/](#)
[/Profiles/](#)
[/Search/](#)
[/Podcasts/](#)

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Reinforce, Reinforce, Reinforce Elementary Paraeducator Honored by Kansas CEC with Exceptional Opportunity of the Year Award

(McPherson, Kansas) Wendy Berg, a paraeducator who works at Roosevelt Elementary School in McPherson, Kansas, is the 2007 recipient of Kansas CEC's "Exceptional Opportunity of the Year Award." Berg became a paraeducator 21 years ago, and has been at Roosevelt for the past 15 years, where she works in a non-categorical resource room, supporting children with a variety of disabilities. On May 14, 2007, she was honored by the McPherson Unified School District #419, with a presentation of a certificate at a meeting of the USD 419 Board of Education.

Each year the Kansas Council for Exceptional Children (kansascec.org) recognizes children with special needs, educators, administrators, paraeducators, and other individuals or organizations who provide or demonstrate exemplary contributions toward the field of special education. Wendy Berg is being honored in concert with a variety of state-wide and local activities to raise awareness of Exceptional Children's Week, celebrated May 7-11. "She is an excellent choice," said Dr. Marilyn Kaff, a special education faculty member at Kansas State University and member of this year's awards committee. "It is wonderful that we can acknowledge the key contributions of a paraeducator."

Berg was nominated by Eric Hoops, a special education teacher at Roosevelt Elementary, who believes that her actions benefit not only the students she works with, but also the school as a whole. "It is extremely encouraging to see Wendy turn tough kids into learners," said Hoops. "This makes for an improved school atmosphere, improved test scores and, above all else, improved students."

"Wendy Berg is an outstanding teacher," said her principal, Pam Klenda, who noted that, although a licensed teacher, Berg prefers working one-on-one with students as a para, instead of having her own classroom and being in front of large groups. Collaboration with special education teachers and regular classroom teachers is an important part of doing the work that paraeducators do in Kansas schools, and Berg excels at this

aspect of the job. "Other special education teachers in the building, as well as other paras, the school psychologist, the behavior specialist, and the speech/language teacher provide her with different ideas," explained Eric Hoops, but Berg implements them "and makes the gains happen." Many times when Hoops brings a new idea for an activity to Berg, he finds she has already started setting it up for the next day.

Paraeducator Wendy Berg believes that several factors contribute to the learning of her students: high expectations, consistent enforcement of rules, and constant reinforcing. "My expectations are high that they can do things that other people think they can't do," explains Berg. "Any progress, no matter how minute, praise, praise, praise, is my motto." She also says that it is necessary to use a combination of short-term reinforcers, such as prizes or tokens, to motivate students, and long-term rewards, such as a pizza party or movie when everyone has helped to meet a major goal.

Along with her positive reinforcement of targeted behaviors and learning goals, Berg insists on strict adherence to a set of rules. "It is important not to give them an inch," she explained, on behaviors such as raising your hand to speak and "using nice words." As a paraeducator, she also takes seriously her responsibility to implement behavior plans which have been set up for students individually.

Because of her years of experience at Roosevelt, Berg naturally takes on a mentoring role with new paraeducators at the school. "The teachers don't have to spend so much time training them," said Berg, who uses modeling and answers lots of questions that new paras ask.

What motivates Wendy Berg to create exceptional opportunities at her school every day? "I just love the kids," she said. "Each child is different, and I am constantly reinforcing every little thing that I like that they're doing."

Press release, dated April 28, 2007, from the Kansas Federation of the Council for Exceptional Children
kansascec.org

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