



**For Immediate Release**

## **Urbandale Special Education Program: Transforming Lives Through Quality Learning**

*The redesigned Urbandale High School Special Education Program integrates core academics with real-life application; resulting in a more meaningful, purposeful, and inspiring learning environment*

**URBANDALE, Iowa – April 30, 2013** – The [Urbandale High School](#) Special Education Program, supporting students with severe or profound intellectual disabilities, has been redesigned to better support and empower students both inside and outside the classroom. The program embraces students with intellectual disabilities with a holistic approach to education that encourages skills leading to greater independence, integrates core academics with real-life application, and remembers first and foremost that these are students that happen to have a disability – not disabled students.

When Julie McKibben, Strategist II: Mental Disabilities Teacher at Urbandale High School, took over the program five years ago, she did so with the intention of transforming it to more closely align with the Urbandale vision of being a district that brings learning to life for everyone. McKibben believed that students with intellectual disabilities needed a functional curriculum that integrated academics with real-life application. If students achieved high marks on a math skills assessment, but couldn't introduce themselves in a social setting or purchase a gallon of milk at the grocery store, then the time spent in the classroom was wasteful, vastly underutilized, and without real purpose.

“Quality learning has allowed our students with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to develop independence while learning in a real-life format. They will leave UHS with skills that will transfer to post-secondary opportunities,” said McKibben.



**1. Julie McKibben, Strategist II: Mental Disabilities Teacher, Urbandale High School**

The functional curriculum focuses on project-based learning environments. Students may spend a portion of their day in an office, kitchen, daily living, grocery store, or retail site. All sites are located within Urbandale High School classrooms and are structured to mirror real-life settings. Often times, students that have disabilities are given very few opportunities to make their own decisions, which unintentionally stifles motivation and limits learning. This is why the Urbandale team encourages students to take greater ownership of their learning through the use of quality tools that help students guide their own instruction. Learning is both individualized and generalized for students knowing that each student has unique needs, while all students share common truths for living a life with purpose, meaning, and connection.

"We believe that aligning to the Iowa Core, and providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum does not mean that we should lose the individuality in our programming, or sacrifice quality preparation for life, learning, and the world of work. Julie has created a program that is ideal for the population she serves, and parents have been very supportive of this direction," said Jason Volmer, Coordinator of Special Education, Urbandale Community School District.

Building a joy in learning, an aptitude for collaboration, and a sense of community throughout are fundamental tenets for the program's success. Instilling these life-long skills has quickly transcended classroom learning to real-life application with the development of the Clothing Closet. The Clothing Closet is a student-run, non-profit business that accepts clothing donations in order to give to those in need. With the help of teachers and associates, students manage the Clothing Closet by accepting donations, laundering clothing received, responding to order requests, managing inventory, and interacting with customers. All clothing is provided free of charge to those in need, and done so with the same degree of dignity and respect that these students have come to value and believe they are worthy of in their own lives.

The Clothing Closet has been so successful that it has outgrown its space at the high school and has expanded to a satellite location next door to [The Urbandale Food Pantry](#). Hours of operation at the satellite location are weekdays between 10:00am-2:00pm and at the high school location on Tuesday afternoons between 3:30pm-5:30pm.



**2. UHS students with intellectual disabilities managing the Clothing Closet**

The Urbandale Special Education Program is considered by many to be a model program for what's possible and achievable for students with intellectual disabilities. The completely redesigned program that McKibben and team have developed not only enriches the lives of students, but empowers students to enrich the lives of the entire Urbandale community.

**About Urbandale Community School District**

The Urbandale Community School District includes portions of Des Moines and Urbandale, Iowa. The district serves over 4,000 students in six elementary schools, one middle school, and one comprehensive high school. The Urbandale district supports an increasingly diverse student population where 50 languages are spoken. Building on the existing foundation of excellence in education, Urbandale is transforming education throughout the district. By implementing innovative Quality/Continual Improvement tools and tactics that create learning environments that more fully engage, challenge, and motivate students, Urbandale is taking transformation from theory into practice. Urbandale prepares students for becoming life-long learners and is a school district that brings learning to life for everyone. To learn more, visit: [www.urbandaleschools.com](http://www.urbandaleschools.com)

Urbandale Community School District  
11152 Aurora Avenue  
Urbandale, IA 50322

**Contact:**

Dena Soenke  
Communications Partner  
Urbandale Community School District  
[soenked@urbandale.k12.ia.us](mailto:soenked@urbandale.k12.ia.us)