

Dear Southern Plains Education Cooperative Board:

My name is Sara Kirsch and I am a Special Education Teacher in the Bridges Program. I have a license in Emotional Behavior Disorders and Specific Learning Disabilities, with 26 years of experience in special education. I worked as a Behavioral Interventionist for four years in a mainstream school in Austin before starting at Bridges. I have seen amazing growth in the students I have worked with due to recent changes implemented in the curriculum and classroom strategies.

When I started here in 2014 we occupied only two classrooms in the Winnebago building with behavioral students in grades K-8 in one classroom; it was a challenging year. Some of these students had extremely severe behaviors. Behaviors including; eloping, hitting, kicking, swearing, spitting, biting, destruction of property, bullying, and manipulation from older kids to younger kids.

My classroom was crowded for the type of students serviced; with no location to separate students' behaviors students exhibited included elopement to the point of leaving the building, destroying property, climbing, and entering unsafe areas. I was able to decrease some of the behaviors using my experience, but because the building was not equipped to meet the needs of a child with mental health concerns and diagnosis, it became difficult.

Every student learns differently which is why alternative learning environments are created. We have implemented changes that decreased behaviors and increased academics. These included:

- Winnebago mainstream Elementary students moved to into district facilities in Blue Earth, giving us access to the whole building. This allowed us to utilize more staff and classrooms to decrease class size and separate ages for more appropriate placement of students.
- We built sensory rooms with equipment allowed for sensory and movement breaks to decrease the behaviors and increase academic success.
- Combining staff with other programs allowed us to train and monitor students that cannot be in the classroom.

The need for a level four program is to give these students specialized instruction in which they can learn to become appropriate citizens in our communities, educate them to the best of their abilities, and address each specific mental health need. If we do not have the space required for that programming, these students have to stay in the mainstream environment, have many difficulties, interfere with the learning of others, and do not have access to staff with the skills to teach them strategies to be successful and appropriate in their communities.

We need to be able to separate certain students in their own space, allow them places to go in the building to decrease anxieties and anger. This is necessary to keep all students and staff safe; students are able to learn coping skills that can be utilized the rest of their life.

I have seen the change in many students since I have started at Southern Plains; the facility changes were a key element to those changes. I am excited about the possibilities we can make once we have a well-established building and a long-term solution.

Sara Kirsch  
Elementary Bridges Teacher  
Southern Plains Education Cooperative