

# The Wayne RESA Roundtable S1.E7 - The “What” and “Why” of Essential Elements

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Essential elements, cognitive disabilities, grade level standards, academic rigor, equity, individualized education plans, adapted curriculum, differentiated instruction, collaboration, professional development, alternative assessments, inclusion, personalized learning, student agency, inclusive learning communities.

## SPEAKERS

Lisa Cleveland, Kate Pearson, Beth Santer

### **Beth Santer** 00:00

Welcome to the Wayne RESA Round Table podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne RESA facilitators who will be joining you for some of these conversations. Today I'm excited to hear more about the essential elements from Kate Pearson and Lisa Cleveland. Kate is one of our RESA consultants who leads the essential element work for the county, and Lisa is a classroom teacher in Livonia at Webster Elementary, in one of their classrooms that has students who utilize the essential elements. Kate and Lisa welcome to the podcast. It's great to have you here.

### **Lisa Cleveland** 00:48

Thank you.

### **Kate Pearson** 00:49

Thank you so much.

### **Beth Santer**

So the first question is going to be for Kate.

So Kate, for listeners who may not be familiar, what are the essential elements and how do they connect to grade level standards?

### **Kate Pearson** 00:59

Yeah so the central elements are Michigan's simplified alternative academic standards, and they're really designed specifically for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. So they're directed, they're directly connected to general education content standards, which are the common core state standards, but they're written in a way that really makes them more accessible. So instead of lowering our expectations, the central elements provide alternate pathways to those grade level content, and they outline what students can learn and do with appropriate supports; maintaining a strong connection to the academic rigor of the general ed standards, while adapting to the unique learning needs of our students.

### **Beth Santer** 01:45

So it sounds like the essential elements are able to give our students with complex learning the breadth and depth of a curriculum

**Kate Pearson 01:55**

Exactly, yeah, it really allows them that access and to be able to get the same access to really high quality, strong academic content alongside their same age peers.

**Beth Santer 02:04**

Okay, so how do the essential elements support equity and access for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

**Kate Pearson 02:13**

And that's why I really love the essential elements, because they're all about equity. They're rooted in equity. They ensure that students who were once left out of standards based education are now included in the academic conversation. So by aligning to grade level content and really focusing on individual strengths and communication styles, the essential elements open up academic opportunities that are meaningful for our students and really achievable. This kind of inclusion, it really promotes access, not just to like curriculum, but for ways that they can participate in the classroom, ways that they're able to take assessments, and ultimately to their access to the broader school community. So it ensures that every student is seen as capable. They're able to learn and they're given the right tools and support.

**Beth Santer 03:03**

So my understanding is you led a work group over the summer. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? And I believe Lisa was involved in that as well, in terms of, what was the goal of that work group, what were your outcomes?

**Kate Pearson 03:16**

Yeah, so I led the central elements literacy curriculum committee. It was made up of 27 committee members across 13 different districts, and Lisa was one of our lovely committee members that we were so grateful to have with her expertise and experience as an educator. But we really started out by reviewing what we already have like within the literacy curriculum content for essential elements, what materials are on our website to see what needed to be updated and what teachers really felt like they needed more of. We determined those needs, especially for our students within the EE classroom and for the educators that lead our EE classrooms, and we ended up creating a new curriculum map and an assessment form that is still kind of in the works, but we're really excited to roll that out and kind of finalize it this school year but it was really great work. A lot of great experience in the room, ranging from teachers all the way up to special ed directors. So we were really lucky to have eight days over the summer to collaborate and continue this great work.

**Beth Santer 04:21**

That sounds fantastic. So Lisa, let's switch to the classroom. What does instruction look like in a classroom that's effectively using the essential elements?

**Lisa Cleveland 04:31**

So a classroom that is effectively using essential elements is going to be a classroom that has students that are on IEPs or individualized education plans, and oftentimes you're going to see an adapted curriculum, such as teach town or unique learning systems. And those curriculums are designed to provide access to those grade level expectations, while also focusing on the foundational skills and knowledge that we can provide our students with ELA, math, science and social studies. You're going to

see a lot of visuals in a classroom, because the visuals provide our students with meaning to their environment, as well as providing encouragement for independence. And then you're going to see that differentiated instruction for the range of complexity that our students have, and that is based on not only their IEP goals, but their individualized student needs. And then you'll probably see a lot of routine that's repeated over and over, as well as very meaningful structure for our students, as well as small group instruction that's going to be the main way that information is provided to our students. Not only helps our students with the time to focus with meaning, but it's also giving them access to all of those foundational skills in a daily setting. A lot of it will also be through interaction with materials. So we might use adaptive books, they might have manipulatives, there might be some tech lessons that give them instant feedback, and ultimately, we're making an environment that's sensory friendly and meets all of their needs as a whole child.

**Beth Santer 06:10**

So knowing that special education students are general education students first, even in center classrooms, there has to be that collaboration. So what role does collaboration between gen ed teachers and special education teachers and support staff play in implementing the essential elements?

**Lisa Cleveland 06:30**

Well, our Gen Ed teachers as well as support staff and then the special education teachers are all key people on an IEP team. So we work collaboratively to help make sure that our students are getting everything that they need to be successful. With our general education teachers, they're obviously a great asset, because our students are gen ed students first, and they're able to help guide us and make sure that we are meeting those grade level expectations. And then our job as special education teachers would be to provide an adapted version, using the essential elements to make sure that our students can access that material at their level. And our support staff, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language, they are all huge assets, especially in the classroom, to providing our students meeting their sensory needs or their communication needs through using possibly AAC devices. And then it just that collaboration is so important to providing consistency for our students across domains and giving them every opportunity possible.

**Beth Santer 07:44**

Great. So Kate knowing that RESA, one of the roles of RESA is to provide support to staff, what supports or professional development do teachers need in order to use the essential elements well?

**Kate Pearson 07:56**

And that's really such an important question, because the success of the essential elements really depends on how well teachers are supported in using them. So first and foremost, teachers really need that targeted professional development that helps them understand both like, what and the why behind the essential elements. So this really means not just reading the standards, but also learning how to like connect those essential elements to the IEP goals, designing accessible and meaningful instruction using Universal Design for Learning, which is known as UDL and evidence based strategies in the classroom. But really, training alone isn't enough. Teachers really also need that ongoing support, like access to instructional coaches, the collaborative planning time that they so often miss out on and ready to use resources that align with our Essential Element standards. But we also can't, really forget the value of like that peer collaboration that Lisa was just talking about, when teachers really are given opportunities to work together, share what's working, reflect on their students progress, it really leads to like, stronger and more effective instruction. And we can't forget about our administrators and our district leaders, because they play a really important role as well. They can support teachers really by creating a culture of high expectations for all learners, and really ensuring that teachers have the time, the tools and the trust they need to work well together. So in short, professional development, really

around essential elements should be ongoing. It should be practical and it should be collaborative, with a focus on inclusion and student centered teaching.

**Beth Santer 09:39**

So, next question is about assessments, and with our students that have complex learning needs, they're going to need those alternate assessments. So my question is going to be to Lisa, how did the essential elements tie into alternate assessments and accountability measures?

**Lisa Cleveland 09:54**

Well, alternative assessments and accountability, this is very important for our students. The alternative assessments in Michigan, our state assessment is called the Mi-Access and that is directly aligned to grade level academic standards based on those essential elements. And having that alternative assessment allows teachers to measure progress from a student's individualized level of complexity, so it's helping to meet them exactly where they are. And then having that cohesive framework to tie together our daily instruction, the IEP progress monitoring and then the alternative assessment progress helps us have more meaningful instruction and assessment and accountability from not only our district, but also from the state.

**Beth Santer 10:43**

So it sounds like the essential elements are aligned to those alternative assessments.

**Lisa Cleveland 10:48**

Yep.

**Beth Santer 10:50**

So Lisa, we're staying with you here. So what advice would you give to a teacher who's just beginning to learn about the essential elements?

**Lisa Cleveland 10:58**

That's a big one. The essential elements, I think they are our bread and butter for special education, and they help guide everything we do for every student. So my biggest advice would be, don't be afraid to ask questions, but also to understand that every student is a general education student first, and to utilize your colleagues. Even if you are just learning about the essential elements, you're going to have veteran teachers around you that have so much information to share with you. Don't try and figure it out on your own. Definitely utilize your team, and don't be afraid to learn from others and beg, borrow and steal.

**Beth Santer 11:42**

So Kate, how do you see the role of essential elements evolving in the next few years as we continue to focus on inclusion and access?

**Kate Pearson 11:50**

Yeah, it's a really important moment in education right now. We know that we have a lot of work to do, but as the push for inclusion and equity and access continues to grow I really believe that essential elements are going to play an even more like central role in shaping what inclusive education looks like, especially across Wayne County. We'll likely see more integration of essential elements into our general education settings. This means not just adapting content for students with significant cognitive disabilities, but really truly having that co-planning and co-teaching with general education teachers and special educators. They're going to be working together so that students can be learning side by side. And secondly, I really think there's going to be a stronger focus on personalized learning, really

incorporating technology, alternative communication methods, and flexible instructional strategies to meet students where they are while also aiming higher and having those high expectations. The essential elements give us a framework for doing that in a way that standards based learning does, but also we want to make it really individualized, so we're also likely going to see more of an emphasis on student voice and student agency, even for learners with really complex needs. So as we continue to innovate and like the essential elements can serve as a tool, not just for academic instruction, but for really helping students communicate their preferences, help them build independence and really prepare for life beyond school, because we know that as educators, our ultimate goal for our students is to be as independent as possible. And I really see the role of essential elements really evolving through ongoing refinement and collaboration with educators, with we need to get families involved with researchers and policy makers, because we all need to work together to keep improving and moving the needle forward. So the goal is really not to just access for access's sake, but make sure the inclusion is meaningful and it leads to real outcomes for students. So in the years ahead, the essential elements, they really will be more than just alternate standards, but there'll be a foundation for building truly inclusive learning communities and I'm really excited to continue that work across Wayne County, with the team. So we have, we have great educators and great leaders, and I'm lucky to be a be a part of that

**Beth Santer 14:20**

Sounds fantastic. When we look at the work group that you led in the summer, in terms of moving forward with that are there any goals to continue working with that group?

**Kate Pearson 14:32**

Yeah, we're gonna do smaller subcommittees throughout the 25 and 26 school year, focusing... continuing to focus on literacy and look at different types of assessments, like the social studies, Mi-Access assessment that we've been piloting. And then moving into summer of 2026 we are going to focus our lens on math, and do another math summer committee work. So we're really excited about that for next summer.

**Beth Santer 15:01**

Well, we look forward to hearing more about this as you continue with that work group. I and the RESA community want to thank Kate Pearson and Lisa Cleveland for sharing all of their insight and for being with us today. Thanks to all our listeners. We hope you join us again for the Wayne RESA Round Table podcast.