



Matt Nielsen Interview

Southern Plains Educational Cooperative and PAES making a difference in southern Minnesota.



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INTERVIEW WITH Matt Nielsen

February, 2018

TAI recently caught up with Matt Nielsen, the Work Based Learning teacher for the cooperative and asked him to share his experience with PAES.

TAI: Thanks for taking the time to talk to us, Matt. To begin, please tell us about yourself, your team and your mission.

Matt: My name is Matt Nielsen and I work for the Southern Plains Educational Cooperative which is headquartered in Fairmont, Minnesota. The cooperative administers special education programs for six school districts in southern Minnesota and also runs its own campus in Winnebago, Minnesota. Our PAES Lab is at the Winnebago building. We have a full time PAES supervisor, Stephanie Stefanske. Steph has visited other labs and she is passionate about the program and how it has such a positive effect on our students. As the Work Based Learning teacher, I know how well

the PAES program works perfectly with our transitional goals for our students. My job is really directed towards preparing students for life outside of school and the PAES Lab provides an invaluable tool for students, parents and teachers in making transition choices.

TAI:How did you first learn about PAES?

Matt: The cooperative Director, Sarah Mittelstadt, invited me to tour a PAES Lab in Austin, Minnesota. After viewing several sessions we decided that PAES would provide great programming and assessment opportunities for our students.

TAI: Why did you purchase a PAES Lab?

Matt: As part of transitioning students and work-based learning, PAES provides not just an assessment tool, but also a diagnostic tool. It helps not just to identify what a student does well but also what they like. Students are not typically asked if they like what they're doing in school but with PAES the instant feedback a student gives regarding task satisfaction is a key part of future career exploration and satisfaction.

TAI: What were your expectations for PAES and how is your Lab meeting them?

Matt: Generally, we expected, and somewhat sold to our school case managers, that PAES would provide them with good data which they like for their files. We did not anticipate the level of participation and enjoyment that the students would have for the program. Taking very enthusiastic students and combining their energy with the data has proven time and again that the data is accurate, usable, and personal to the lives of our students.

TAI: Did you consider solutions other than PAES and if so, what and why?

Matt: No, not to the best of my knowledge.

TAI: Please describe your PAES experience.

Matt: Let me describe what just happened at 9:41 a.m. on January 17, 2018 a student just finished SS-5. In this project he makes a 1x1x1 cube out of wood. the student added dots to make a die out of the cube. He came into the room excitedly and said, "Look what I just made!" And he meant those words: HE made it himself, reading the instructions and following procedures. This is the most common and satisfying element of the PAES experience. Students are learning the value of following directions for the sake of a positive outcome for themselves, and the satisfaction that comes from full accuracy in the effort. Daily, we see students who are surprising themselves with their performance and their outcomes. We are surprised by the reactions of students who do not succeed the first time. They are able to keep these failures in perspective and realize that doing something over is not a great penalty. They also realize that employers will want effort and accuracy as part of having a good employee. Every day we look forward to coming to the lab and seeing this exploration unfold.

TAI: Would you share a story about a positive experience a student has had with PAES?

Matt: I could share one about every student who has attended the lab. I will highlight a student who was very focused on being a fire fighter or police officer. Unfortunately, he does not have the intellectual ability to pursue these jobs. Through the PAES lab we all learned together (student, parents, teachers) that he has wonderful abilities and interests in the area of consumer/service, particularly with cooking aspects. His interest levels were consistently high, and his performance matched preference so he had clear aptitudes in this area. Because of the PAES lab he refocused what he wanted to do with his future, and is now working, very happily, in a grocery store bakery; weighing, measuring, and baking. All skills that were appreciated in the PAES lab.

TAI: Describe the effect PAES has on student outcomes?

Matt: While we are a little early in this determination, I think that the biggest effect is that as we discuss interest and transitions, we are doing so in a data driven way. And because we are able to address the aptitudes of the student, the intersection of interest and ability, we are providing great recommendations for student transition.

TAI: What kind of feedback have you received from parents?

Matt: Parents have consistently told us how the PAES lab is the first class since elementary school where their kids are coming home enthusiastic and happily discussing their day at school. Parents consistently ask if there is, sort of, a PAES Plus where the students can do more advanced exploration. Parents have been eager to see and understand the data related to their student. They are also eager to hear, because they understand it, their student's work habits and attitudes.

TAI: If you could tell your peers about PAES, what would you say to them?

Matt: With PAES you will find enthusiastic students, unbelievable support from Heidi Johnson and TAI, understandable and logical programming, manageable equipment, and flexible curriculum by design. On the topic of support, TAI and their representative in Minnesota, Heidi Johnson provide fast answers to our questions, excellent customer service if we have any equipment difficulties, and a general attitude of willingness to back the program and the products. In a time when companies have great customer service until the sale is made, TAI and Heidi really stand out.

TAI: What one thing could we do to improve your experience?

Matt: The ability to provide more mechanical, cooking, construction, assembly, and computer options would be great. The way TAI breaks things into tasks is second to none. If there was a flight of more advanced topics which we would be able to buy the materials would be great. Also, a list of actual or preferred suppliers for material replacement would be great.

TAI: Do you refer PAES to others?

Matt: Always! I take pride in being a small part of this program. I take community groups through the PAES lab so that they see what we are doing and how we do it.

TAI: Describe how it is to work with Talent Assessment, Inc.?

Matt: As noted above, it is a pleasure. The training provided by Heidi Johnson and TAI was well thought out and sensible. By beginning with a great training, I had the confidence to run this lab on a day to day basis. As we progressed, TAI and Heidi are quick to return calls and e-mails. They have probably heard the question a hundred times, but they always treated me with respect and even appreciation for contacting them. I was self-employed for 25 years. I took care of all of the purchasing for my office and became callused towards sales people and their promises of customer service after the sale. In my experience, TAI is the single most satisfying customer experience I have had. No hidden fees, e-mails are not ignored, I am not treated like the village idiot, and every interaction concludes with a reaffirmation of mutual appreciation. I am not sure I can think of any product or service that I recommend more than TAI and Heidi Johnson.

TAI: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Matt: I am tremendously proud to be part of this program. I have seen a lot of curriculum come and go. But this is such a sensible program and works so well for the goals of our special education program. I thoroughly believe that TAI and the PAES program will be noted as being a significant part of a more satisfying life for our students. I feel fortunate to be part of this program and to see the changes in our students and the daily smiles that I receive.

TAI: Thank you, Matt, for taking the time to share your experiences with PAES with us!