

# PLATO® Focus Helps Students Realize Potential in Dedicated Special Education Classrooms



## Overview

- Year 1: PLATO® Focus Reading and Language Program was used in an inclusion class with 12 special education and 18 traditional 2nd grade students.
- Year 2: The inclusion program ended and special education students were moved into a dedicated classroom. This included 10 special education students with levels from autistic to 6-months behind-grade-level. In addition, all first grade classrooms across the district used PLATO Focus for reading instruction.

At the beginning of each school year, students in the special education classroom at Tulsa Trail Elementary are given a placement test to find their entry skill level. According to Roz Craig, special education teacher, “All children entering this year lacked the ability to recognize and use vowels and were at a very low level for putting 3-letter words together.” So, Craig tailored the program to start with an introduction of vowels. “The beauty of the program is the ability to modify delivery. That is what makes it work in traditional classrooms, inclusion classroom, and special education programs,” said Craig.

Ms. Craig modified the program to best instruct low language learners. “Most phonics books start with consonants, but one of our primary goals is to help students create 3-letter words. They can’t do that without vowels, so it was extremely helpful to be able to reorder the presentation of PLATO Focus phonemes and start with short a,e, i, o, and u sounds.

## Customized weekly schedule fits student’s needs

Each day Ms. Craig presents the PLATO Focus lessons orally in a whole-group setting. Even with a range of abilities from autistic to 6-months behind-grade-level, Craig has found that PLATO Focus is effective in her whole-group instruction. “I have found that the lower level students have been able to keep up and are actually accelerated by working with the more advanced students. Even in the group instruction, PLATO Focus allows students to see their individual success. For example, the lowest level students struggle more with dictation. Their more advanced peers may be able to completely write the sentences correctly. The lower level students may not write the sentence correctly but do know to put a capital at the beginning of a sentence and a punctuation mark at the end—an individual accomplishment that we can celebrate and expand on.” During the whole-class instruction, Craig provides more clues and more reinforcement to the lower level learners.

**INSTITUTION:** Hopatcong Borough Schools

**LOCATION:** Hopatcong, New Jersey—3 elementary schools, 1 middle school, 1 high school

**CONTACT:**  
Roz Craig special education teacher, Tulsa Trail Elementary, Hopatcong Borough Schools

“I have first-hand knowledge that the program is working... and every teacher who has had the opportunity to use it agrees on its power to improve early literacy skills. Every kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade student should have the opportunity to work on this program because it will help them develop a solid reading foundation.”

ROZ CRAIG,  
SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER,  
TULSA TRAIL ELEMENTARY

## Sample schedule for using PLATO Focus for special education

After 20 years in special education, Craig has found the instructional pattern that works best for her and her students. She has customized the PLATO Focus program to match that sequence. Her lesson plan includes:

**Day 1:** Introduce the phoneme of the week. Craig kicks off each new phoneme by focusing on the language portion first—the sentences and words. She starts with exercises where students change the sound. For example, “remove the c from cat and add an h.” Craig said that people observing her classroom are amazed at how well the students can do this skill. In day 1, the students are also introduced to the spelling words for the week.

**Day 2:** Students count the number of syllables in words and dictate sentences, including the recommended “Focus” sentence and a sentence Craig writes herself. Craig and the students also complete a lesson on creating compound words.

**Day 3:** Dictation of sentences expands with Craig dictating a small story using the sentences and words introduced in the previous two days. Students work with a moveable alphabet manipulative to create sentences.

**Day 4:** Students complete the PLATO Focus reading lesson in which Craig reads a story that incorporates the phoneme of the week and students fill in the appropriate word—stimulating memory. Craig and the students review spelling words.

**Day 5:** Craig dictates the spelling test to the students.

## Technology provides individual practice aligned to whole-group instruction

Craig’s students also work on the technology component. Students work on the PLATO Focus computer lessons for individual practice to reinforce the whole-group instruction. Each student works for at least 20 minutes each week. With flexibility built into PLATO Focus technology, Craig is able to program the computer lessons for each student’s skill level, making the practice lessons tailored to best support their academic improvement.

## Supplemental materials support PLATO Focus program

Craig supplements the PLATO Focus program with multiple other resources but “everything is

based on the PLATO Focus lesson.” Craig creates her own materials, uses a textbook for literature pieces, and uses many items for individual practice that she has acquired over the years.

The special education class also uses multiple assessments to track progress. A reading inventory helps to determine word, letter, and spelling recognition. Each month Craig completes a high-level record of what the students have accomplished related to each PATO Focus phoneme introduced. She also keeps creative writing samples from the students and includes all of these items in a personal portfolio.

## Dramatic literacy improvement are realized with PLATO Focus

“Because I use so many different assessments and not one pre-and posttest, it is hard to provide discrete quantitative results,” said Craig.

“However, from my observations and experience teaching special education students, I can tell you that the students have seen dramatic growth using PLATO Focus. Kids who entered my program unable to read one word are now reading at an end-of-first-grade level, because their phonics and phonemic awareness are that much better.”

Over the course of 20 years teaching in special education Ms. Craig has worked with multiple programs like Project Read, Write to Read and more. “Considering all the programs I have used, PLATO Focus is the best program for special education students because it combines sensory learning with the ‘rules’ of reading. The movement of counting syllables, forming the sounds, and counting words really help improve achievement for my struggling readers.”

The lessons are not only educationally effective—students also have fun learning new sounds. “The other day we taught the ‘th’ lesson. PLATO Focus tells students that they must stick out their tongue to form the sound. Now every time a student sticks out their tongue, they associate it with the ‘th’ sound—we had a lot of tongues sticking out since that lesson.”

Parents also recognize the benefits of PLATO Focus. Craig shares quarterly results on student progress with parents. Parents relate that they are continuously surprised that the students can now sound out words.”