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GREENE

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cerebral palsy, a non-verbal learning disability and obsessive compulsive disorder — credits his success in school and in life to parents and teachers who never accepted less than his best. He was one of four keynote speakers to address educators and advocates gathered Monday in Des Moines for the kickoff of Iowa's first-ever statewide special education conference.

"I was lucky enough to have teachers who walked the fine line of helping me without doing it for me," said Greene, who uses a wheelchair.

And in Iowa, just how to accommodate children in special education continues to be a challenge. The achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers is the worst in the nation, according to data gleaned from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

On average, special education students finished 57 percentage points behind their classmates on the fourth-grade reading exam. The gap between students with disabilities and those without was 58 percentage points on the eighth-grade math test.

Yet on Monday, Greene told educators that his story shows that diagnosis is not destiny.

The college student uses a laptop computer to complete his school work, and studies using ebooks. Because Greene lacks fine motor coordination, a university "notetaker" literally lends a hand in lecture classes.



Tyler Greene, a special education student from Waterloo who attends the University of Northern Iowa, was a featured speaker Monday at the state two-day special education conference being held in Des Moines. RODNEY WHITE/THE REGISTER

But the expectation remains that Greene can and will perform at the same academic level of his peers. Living with a disability shouldn't give teachers or individuals permission to lower the standards, he said.

The nearly 1,200 conference attendees chuckled as Greene described how he managed to join his friends for a trail ride atop a horse. (Hint: "Duct tape has lots of uses.") And using a wheelchair didn't earn him any favors on the softball field, he noted.

"I'd hit the ball, and my

CHECK OUT GREENE'S STORY

Greene began advocating for students with disabilities in 2006, when he made a video called "I am Tyler" as part of his Eagle Scout project. Check it out at www.imtyler.org.

dad would push me around the bases," said Greene, who has been an advocate for students with disabilities since 2006. "I didn't get any extra outs; no favors."

The conference, called "Pursuing the Promise," continues today, with more discussions about how to

improve the school experience for the state's more than 60,000 special education students.

Likewise, Greene plans to keep speaking on behalf of children with special needs.

The young man has been part of national campaigns aimed at breaking down barriers, and is in the process of forming an Iowa group to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Boosting academic outcomes for special needs students starts with educating teachers and par-

ents that anything is possible, said Greene's mother, Gina, who accompanied him to the conference.

Adapting a lesson may take more time, creativity or energy — but teachers need to believe that students with disabilities can learn.

"We knew what we wanted for our other two kids, and we wanted the same for him," Gina Greene said.

Greene received a standing ovation from conference attendees following his hourlong speech. Ramona Ubaldo of the Iowa

Civil Rights Commission said Greene's story showed the importance of including people with disabilities in every sector of society, including the classroom.

"Everybody has the ability," she said. "It's about figuring out how to make it happen."

Greene's advice? Instead of focusing on what students can't do, find out where their abilities lie. All students deserve to dream big, he added.

"I've met a lot of people, but I've never met anyone with dream-impairment," Greene noted.

Special-ed student encourages educators to help others like him pursue their dreams

State conference focuses on helping students bridge the achievement gap.

By **MARY STEGMEIR**
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Tyler Greene has big plans. The 22-year-old University of Northern Iowa student wants to write a book, get a job and make enough money to outfit his own place with a big-screen "high-def, surround sound" TV.

After years of hard work, those goals are now tantalizingly close. The Waterloo man is on track to receive his undergraduate degree in sociology next spring and he's already thinking about where his career could take him.

But for thousands of young Iowans like Greene, the path is not so clear-cut. Greene — who has

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