



# Redefining Success in the IEP Classroom

STORY: DEBBIE BLACK | PHOTO: YOSEF KALINKO

Some people are fortunate to discern their calling early in life. Alex Levinson, '18, is one of the lucky ones. His life experiences have guided him on a clear path to working with marginalized children impacted by trauma.

Growing up in Ruidoso, New Mexico, Alex experienced economic, cultural and social diversity. The town sits adjacent to the Mescalero Apache Tribe reservation and a large percentage of the local population is Native American and Hispanic. The woman who cared for Alex while his parents worked did not speak English. Even as a child, he knew that his home looked different than the homes of his friends.

"I saw kids struggle enormously growing up," Alex says, "and I knew that a lot of them just wanted to fit in. I fell in love at a young age with trying to make everyone feel a part of something."

When he was 13, Alex moved with his family to Birmingham, Ala. For the next 12 years he learned of the racism endured by African-Americans of all ages. His innate desire to befriend and raise up his marginalized peers grew.

After graduating from Birmingham-Southern College with a degree in Elementary Education and Special Education, Alex landed a teaching position in the community. Shortly thereafter, he began researching graduate education programs. A search for the top 25 schools in the U.S. for education revealed that Seattle University was #1. Though he had never been to Seattle, Alex applied to and was accepted into the College of Education's master's program in special education. "I was attracted to the school's offerings around cultural humility and heart-centered education," he says.

Paying for his graduate education was an immediate concern. Alex knew he would have to work his way through school, but

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soon learned his financial burden would be lightened thanks to the generosity of Seattle University donors. He received Andy M. Berg and JWT special education scholarships through the College of Education. Both scholarships recognize graduate students who demonstrate leadership in special education and have financial need.

“What I valued the most about my scholarships is that they didn’t feel like scholarships,” Alex explains. “I felt like I was sponsored, that the donors wanted to help children with exceptionalities and valued what I was doing. Their scholarships allowed me to further my education and to better understand, relate to and help the students I work with. I couldn’t have come to Seattle U without their help.”

While working on his master’s degree at night, Alex taught fulltime working with children on IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) in South Seattle. These students arrive being misunderstood and faced with challenges that result in them often acting out and being mislabeled. Their aggressive behavior frequently results in suspension from school. It’s a difficult learning environment. Knowing he would have to earn the trust of the students, Alex set about immersing himself in the local community. He walked his students home from school, shopped where his students’ families shopped and invited families into the classroom and on field trips. He took a team approach to behavioral tactics, working closely with parents. “I had to redefine success,” Alex says. “Success might be treating others kindly, learning how to get your needs met or noticing when a classmate is struggling.”

“My class is like a family,” he continues. “We start the day by eating breakfast together. When their basic needs are met, kids are ready to learn. My students have made a lot of progress.”

When he arrived at Seattle U, Alex had a lot of ideas about what he wanted to do and his approach to teaching. “I came to Seattle with an advocacy mindset, wanting to create change in the education system and pursue different avenues in getting kids to learn. Seattle U chiseled away the rough edges around my ideas, solidified my understanding of different approaches and gave me direction.”

Alex continues to teach in South Seattle. His goal is to one day work in education at the federal level, designing school systems where success is not defined by grades and test scores alone and where no student is overlooked.

To the donors who chose to support endowments at Seattle U, Alex offers these words of gratitude:

“Thank you for providing me the opportunity to become a better me for my students. Your scholarships were truly a gift and your gift extends through me into the classroom and the community.”

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