

## GET TO KNOW

# Thompson Intermediate School



Heather Nielson  
Educator

## TYPE OF SCHOOL

Urban

## LOCATION

Pasadena, TX  
(Houston area)

## TOTAL STUDENTS

10-20 students in special education, 800-900 total students in grades 7-8

## THE VISION

### Provide a safe space for student expression

For Heather Nielson, a special education teacher at [Thompson Intermediate School](#) near Houston, getting to know her students comes with added challenges. That's because many of her students have severe autism and are unable to communicate verbally.

However, over the past three years, she has found that **using Along has opened up new ways to build relationships with her students and provide them with a safe space to express themselves.** "This tool gives them a way to communicate how they are feeling in a really comfortable way," she said. "You don't always get to see that side of them. Sometimes they're feeling more vulnerable and they want to share and they want to be heard."

Particularly over the past few years, Nielson says that the uncertain times have made creating new points of connection with her students that much more important.

As Nielson explained, "special education is already difficult. It's really important to have that connection with kids. If you don't have that connection then how can you teach them?"

## THE STRATEGY

### Weekly connections with options to respond

As part of a school-wide endeavor, Nielson has been asking her students a reflection question using Along once a week. Students can respond through text, video, or audio. And because there are a range of response options, Nielson's students are able to expand their real world skills.

**"I really found that it gives them another tool to use their voice," said Nielson. "It helps them connect to me and to the world around them. "It's very vital to my classroom. It also gives me a chance to explore other topics with them, to peak their brains and figure out where they are with emotions or social topics that I don't always get to touch on."**

Unlike her colleagues, who are connecting with their students on Along during advisory class time, Nielson works with a small group of 9 students who are in her classroom all day.

"We have some non-verbal students, and the tool has flexibility to allow them to still interact," shared Tanis Griffin, Thompson's school leader. "This is really valuable for those students. For students who don't talk to their teachers, this is bringing them out of their shell."

## THE IMPACT

### Constructive ways to express emotion and better focus in class

These weekly check-ins have helped to create a sea change in Nielson's classroom.

Since using Along, Nielson said the social skills of a particular student have "really improved. Some days he comes in frustrated and in a bad mood, and he's able to voice that in a more constructive way."

**She can also gauge the mood of her full class and find a question in Along to help. "Some days are easier than others. Kids come in and they come in with a lot of baggage," she explained. "[In Along] I can pick a question based on what is going on that day. The different question options really help students who are special needs."**

Nielson added that she thinks other special education teachers can find long-term value in a tool like Along. "Without that connection with your students, you can't focus on behaviors or the academics," she shared. "Even connecting just once a week is huge. It makes a big impact in the classroom."