



MemberProfile:

The West New York Board of Education

Creating an effective public school program for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) can be a daunting task, but one that can be very worthwhile, as demonstrated by the West New York Board of Education and superintendent **Dr. Robert Van Zanten**. Led by Director of Special Services, **Anastasia Olivero**, who also is the parent of an adult with autism, the West New York school district is committed to providing a quality education for each of its students on the autism spectrum. Dedication to ongoing support and training for all involved staff has been a critical element of their program. Approximately 1,000 special needs students receive services in Hudson County, New Jersey. Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams develop nurturing individualized programs with an emphasis on communication and social skills within the least restrictive environment. Many students with an ASD receive special education services via a continuum consisting of consultation, in-class support, in-class resource replacement and pull-out replacement of a particular content issue and self-contained classes for students with disabilities. All teachers within the district's autism program hold a standard Teacher of the Handicapped/Teacher of Students with Disabilities certification and are specially trained in the principles and procedures of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Thus far, two of the teachers have become Board Certified Behavior Analysts® (BCBA). Parents are encouraged to observe the classroom to discuss skills learned in school in an effort to facilitate generalization of skills across environments.

Ms. Olivero recently discussed her district's efforts and shared her suggestions with the hope that other public school districts endeavoring to begin or improve their own autism programs can gain encouragement.

Describe the training and supports that have been provided to your staff members, specialized to their job description.

"All newly hired paraprofessionals during the past two years working in our program have received training from a well-regarded behavioral program during the summer prior to

their start date. Classroom teachers also provide ongoing training to paraprofessionals regarding data collection and instructional/behavioral strategies.

General education specialized area teachers have received training from Autism New Jersey with a basic autism overview and basic ABA.

They also have received training on strategies which assist our students within the confines of their classroom and within the general education

environment. Two of the four teachers in our program are BCBA's and work very closely with our other two teachers who have strong behavioral backgrounds and previously have taught in ABA private schools."

Where did you begin and what resources did you use?

"Our first autism Pre-K classroom began in September 2004 in Public School Two. We had one teacher, along with 2 paraprofessionals. Her strong behavioral background was clearly an asset for our program. Our second autism classroom was opened in September 2006, also at Public School Two. This teacher's strong behavioral background served the program well. Our original teacher moved up to K-2 while our newly hired teacher became our Pre-K teacher."

How do you ensure that your middle and high school classes are preparing the students for life after graduation?

"As part of the Computer Education Curriculum, all students in the 8th grade start researching careers of interests. Students with disabilities are offered a career planning elective designed to guide students in exploring possible career options related to their choice. Upon completion of the course, the students will develop a personal career plan. Students also learn about the laws that protect their rights as individuals with disabilities. Students with severe disabilities who participate in Creating Pathways (grades 7-12) participate in classroom and community-based instruction to develop and enhance academic skills, household management skills, clothing care skills, safety skills, money

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management skills, accessing recreation and leisure activities, developing social skills to interact with adults and peers, accessing and using community resources, using local transportation and developing pre-employment skills. The Child Study Team (CST) case managers interview students in grades 7 and 8, grading their interests and preferences as well as post-school plans. The gathered information is used to develop the Statement of Transition Planning page in the IEP and determine which courses the student will be scheduled for when entering the high school. Our district has a full-time Transition Specialist at Memorial High School, who meets with all students with disabilities in grades 9 through 12. This also includes students who attend out-of-district placements.

What prerequisite skills do you look for when determining how much time an individual student would benefit from spending in the general education environment?

"Prerequisite skills include the student's ability to remain on task, verbalize needs, display appropriate social behavior and tolerance to being in a more unstructured setting than they are accustomed to and limited behavioral issues. The first areas that students typically spend time with non-disabled peers are physical education, art, music, library and computers with paraprofessional support. Classroom teachers use the collected data regarding skill development to determine what supports are required in these settings."

How does your school acknowledge Autism Awareness Month?

"In the past, we've participated in a District Dress Down Day to develop awareness about autism and students on the spectrum. Proceeds went to a variety of agencies. Information was distributed to staff regarding autism and they are now in-tune to individuals with autism through a wide range of ages. This year, a walkathon is the lead activity for our district."

What tips do you have for other public school administrators looking to start or improve their own autism programs?

- "Conduct a needs assessment (e.g.: age group, staffing needs, related personnel, classroom space) to determine where you want to start or expand your program.
- Identify the students, both in and out of district, who will be included in the new class. Meet with the parents to discuss how the district is proposing to meet the students' needs and address parental concerns.
- Observe the students in their current programs and obtain copies of assessment data to gain an under-

standing their skills. After collecting the necessary information, develop transition plans for students who will be returning to the public school setting.

- If you have a current program that is comparable, arrange for the parents to visit the class and speak with the teacher.
- Prior to starting the new class, arrange training on implementing ABA strategies so that all general and special education staff with teaching responsibilities for the class have a working knowledge of how to support students with ASDs.
- Whenever possible, integrate related services into the classroom and/or non-academic areas.
- Set up a home-school communications system that will work for all parties involved. Schedule meetings to make necessary revisions to the current IEP, detailing the services that will be provided within the public school setting as well as a transition schedule, when necessary."

"I recently was asked to conduct workshops for small groups of specials teachers at West New York and was truly impressed by how much they genuinely wanted to learn how to improve their effectiveness with their students with autism," said Autism New Jersey Professional Services Coordinator **Elizabeth Neumann, BCaBA**. "They were open to new ideas, asked great questions, supported each other as colleagues and worked together well. They were very invested in seeing their students succeed." For more information about West New York Schools, contact the Department of Special Services office at 201.553.4000, extension 7152. ■

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If you would like to recommend a school or community member to be profiled in this section, please e-mail jalloway@autismnj.org. Please include the name of the school or person, why you feel profiling this school or person is of interest to the autism community and contact information. Thank you.