



Celebrating children

By AMY STEWART

BYRAM - Parents of special needs children, even more than other parents, dream of a school where programs are designed to meet the individual needs of students. Celebrate the Children, a special school here, strives for social, personal and academic excellence coupled with education in the arts.

Celebrate the Children is a "school for children with alternative learning styles" and is a "comprehensive, State-approved educational program for students on the autistic spectrum" as well as those with Multisystem Developmental Disorders (MSDD) and other challenges such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Down Syndrome. The school also helps children with mild physical disabilities and expressive language delay. Lauren Blaszk, Director and co-founder with Executive Director Monica Osgood says in layman's terms: "We are a State approved private school for the disabled".

The term "private school" may be confusing to some people. Blaszk explains "we are a not-for-profit organization. We are funded mostly by nearly all public funds which come from the home districts of our students and the State". Celebrate the Children services students aged 3 through 17 who have been identified and classified by their local school districts as having special needs. The school is monitored and regulated by the state, just like any school that provides a public education. "We do have a small portion of private students who pay their own tuition, but not many" Blaszk explains. The families that choose to send their students privately often do so as an alternative to decisions made by their local districts. Transportation and cost issues are among the reasons a district might decide against sending those in need to the school.

Celebrate the Children draws students from all areas of New Jersey as well as Pennsylvania and New York. Malorie Osgood, office manager, admits "we even have people from other countries come and visit the school to learn about what it is we do here and how the program works because it is so highly respectful of the children". Representatives from nearly every state and as far away as India, Australia and Japan have come and toured the school in the hopes of bringing back information to their homelands.

On the cutting edge of education since the school opened in January of 2004, being state approved was important to its originators. Celebrate the Children became the first state-approved school in New Jersey to use a copyrighted system called Development Individual Relationship-based Intervention-Greenspan/Wieder approach to meet baseline academic achievement, called the NJ Core Curriculum Content

Standards. The standards are the minimal academics that a child must learn to graduate from a New Jersey school. According to Blaszk, "most of our students do not have cognitive development issues," meaning their students are usually capable of learning the math, language arts, science and social studies that any student is asked to learn. The problem comes with the inability to connect to the teacher and the environment socially and behaviorally so that the information can be learned.

At Celebrate the Children, they first work on making a one to one connection between the student and teacher. They work on identifying triggers that set off undesired behaviors and work through how to control certain responses. During the times when the student is connected, comfortable and in control, academics are taught in traditional methods, moving the student through the curriculum required by the State. Progressing through academics of mainstream education is part of the reason why the students can return to regular classrooms.

The highly successful DIR approach can be confusing to those who do not understand the autistic spectrum to begin with. "It is about getting people to think. We use play and floor time to support goals and the curriculum", Cathy Helmlinger, curriculum coordinator explains. Implementing their approach creates a program that looks a lot like just plain, old fashioned play. Commonplace manipulatives such as blocks and dough, musical instruments and board games all play a major part in educating the children. The process can be long, but incredibly rewarding. With a 1:1 or 1:2 teacher-to-student ratio, highly individualized programs are implemented. A teacher first tries to make a connection with the child, which can be over any particular interest. From Star Wars to Legos, dolls or donuts, whatever the child is interested in, teacher and student become totally engrossed in it together. As trust and bonds are created, layers of educational academic demands are placed upon the students, guiding and moving them through the curriculum and their personal challenges. Helmlinger points out that "we follow the child's lead. We join them at their level then work to meet their needs whether it happens to be social interaction, verbal development or sensory processing issues."

The teaching staff must meet state requirements as well. Osgood reassures parents, letting them know that everyone on the teaching staff "is fully certified". All teachers carry dual certifications having both their regular teaching degrees as well as their Teacher of Students with Disabilities Certificate. "Several of our employees also possess their Masters Degree. Many of our staff are going through the steps it takes to become DIR certified," Osgood continued. The process

is time-consuming with intense specialized studies including presenting a case study done over the span of several years to the Greenspan/Wieder DIR faculty. All staff is directly supervised by the Executive Director, Monica Osgood who is DIR certified and now sits on that faculty and mentors others going through the process/training. Every Friday the school closes 1 p.m. for staff development. Continual teacher training and communication between staff is a big ingredient to the success they have.

Because of the school's consistent success, it quickly grew to 80 students. The explosive growth forced the school to open a second facility at the old Linden Avenue School in Stanhope. Blaszk feels fortunate that they were able to find building space two miles from the original location. With space being an on-going issue due to the increasing number of children with special needs, Blaszk hopes to find space large enough to house the entire school population under one roof.

Success can be difficult to measure, especially when dealing with children with autism, which can sometimes be a one step forward, two steps back learning process. "We know we have succeeded when we return a student to be mainstreamed into their home district" Blaszk smiles warmly as she explains. "When they leave here, we know that they are ready. It is our goal to raise children to the point where they are prepared emotionally, socially, behaviorally, academically and vocationally to live successful and happy lives". "We have happy moments every day, all day long" numerous staff attests to, and so do many students. Student Rachael Myers says she loves coming to school and was thrilled to have her picture taken as she played and sang during music class, just like any other school-aged child would.

A school such as this can be cloaked with a lot of misunderstanding from the local community. Anyone with questions about the school, the program, their mission and direction is invited to come and tour the school. Two open houses are scheduled each month and everyone is invited to attend. Osgood welcomes anyone who has questions to call, speak with her and schedule a visit.

What parent would not want a school for their child that has programs like yoga, drama, field trips and celebrations, academics and social mentoring? For families with special needs children, Celebrate the Children is an educational answer to the prayers of parents and their beloved gifts in specially wrapped packages.

Open to the public is a parent support group that meets once a month. Visit ctcenter.com for details. For more information on Celebrate the Children, go to www.celebratethechildren.org.