

Photos by John Degutis/New Jersey Herald

Pat Fichter, a teacher at Celebrate the Children School, dances with student Jake Mock, 10, in a classroom.



School aide Chris Rasado, left, Justin Uribe, 8, and Greg L from Pack 164, right, start a pinewood derby race at Celebrate Children School.

School celebrates children, involves parents

State-funded facility has grown from three to waiting list

By ROBERTA FUGATE
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BYRAM — Music lingers softly in the air as a student sits in a classroom bouncing on a yoga ball while doing school work.

Across the hall, another student dances with his teacher.

Handways are filled with posters, artwork and photos. Children are interacting with their teachers, maybe not in conventional ways, but they are learning.

Each milestone a student reaches, however large or small, is applauded at the Celebrate the Children School for Children with Alternative Learning Styles in Byram.

Dr. Stanley Greenspan's Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship-Based/Floortime approach is used at the school to help students in the school become prepared to live successful and happy lives. The approach for understanding and treating children challenged by autism spectrum and related disorders involves working with the children in three areas: Developmental — understanding where the child is developmentally. Individual-Difference — Each child has a unique way of taking in the world, sights, sounds, touch, etc. and responding to it. Relationship-Based — Building relationships with primary caregivers is a critical element in helping a child return to a healthy developmental path.

Celebrate the Children is the only state-approved school using this system of learning, known as the DIR system.

Rocio Uribe, whose 8-year-old son Justin has autism, said her son has been attending the school for about a year and "he's doing great." She said her son is more verbal and has been doing a better job of expressing himself when he is upset.

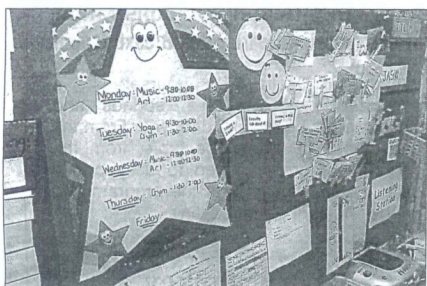
The other day, she said, he said to her, "my engine is too high mommy," a term he learned at school, to let his mother know that he was getting upset. Uribe said her son has been displaying many things at home that he is learning at school. "It's great," she said.

Malorie Osgood, school office administrator, said it is a big step to get the students to recognize their emotions and be able to regulate themselves.

Uribe said she brought her son to the school because he had sensory issues that needed to be addressed.

Osgood said teachers, therapists and parents at the school work together for the best interest of the children.

Osgood's sister, Monica, and partner Lauren Blaszak opened the school, which is totally funded by the state, in 2004 with three children. Currently there are nearly 70 children and more than 100 staff members. Osgood said



The board in the classroom at Celebrate the Children School in Byram shows activities scheduled during the week.

efforts to regulate themselves and helps them reach their full potential through positive reinforcement. The staff realizes each student has his or her own capabilities and limitations and each student follows a program based on his or her own needs.

"We encourage the students to become part of their community," Osgood said.

Robert Johnson, a Scout leader, was at the school to help with the annual pinewood derby. "There is nothing better than seeing 40 to 50 smiling faces," he said.

Johnson's 8-year-old son, Tyler, who is bipolar, is in his second year at the school.

Johnson said the school has been good for his son because he is being taught coping and life

skills and how to solve problems. "It's made quite a difference," he said.

Michelle Pierce Burns had been homeschooling her autistic son when she found information about Celebrate the Children. "I was very, very impressed," she said.

Her son Danson, 8, began school in March and "he's so happy here," she said.

Burns said she bought a DVD for her son the other day and he looked at it, looked at her, looked at the DVD again and then walked over to her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Burns said it was the first time he realized that he had actually received something from her, and that the kiss was his way of thanking her.

"I cry tears of joy every day," she said.

Burns said she had never been invited to be involved with her son's education before he attended Celebrate the Children. She likes the school because they know that parent involvement is so important to a child's education and the staff asks for her input regarding what is best for her child.

"For everybody here, this is not a job. They love these children," she said.

Burns is now working part-time at the school to do fund-raising and development. Because of increased enrollment, the school is quickly outgrowing its current space.

In addition to positive reinforcement, students can earn "money" as rewards for such things as doing homework, asking to take a break instead of getting upset and for using good manners.

A "sensory diet" is established for the students that instructors use so that they know what works for each child in different situations. For example, one student's chart may say he or she needs to

be doing a physical activity to calm down when upset, while another child may need to do some sort of relaxation activity to calm down.

Students come throughout the area, including Pennsylvania

and Manhattan. Teachers through staff development training every afternoon and class are offered for parents one month.

"It truly is a celebration of children," Burns said.

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