

Program provides Asperger Syndrome/autism students a peer network that helps enhance social skills

During the 2005-06 school year, school social worker Ken Jacobs and BOCES special education teacher Anne O'Brien-Teta were awarded a BOCES mini-grant to help start a school-based peer network to support students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA) in developing and enhancing essential social skills. This program was also designed to help raise awareness of the typically developing student about the social challenges of students with AS/HFA. Now in its second successful year, here is a look at this program.

Providing support for their special needs students is what BOCES social worker Ken Jacobs and special education teacher Anne O'Brien-Teta and Mohonasen special education teacher Martha Mallon do best. Throughout the day at Mohonasen High School, they help interpret assignments, re-teach content that was confusing the first time it was taught, even sift through student's backpacks in search of lost homework.

However, high school learning is about much more than academics.

Navigating noisy and crowded hallways and interpreting the shifting social scene can be challenging, even for the most together teen. For special needs students, particularly those with Asperger Syndrome and other forms of high functioning autism (conditions that more and more children and young adults are being diagnosed with), these types of activities can be overwhelming.

Many people with high functioning autism have normal to exceptional intelligence. In fact, Jacobs says that all of their students with these conditions are Regents level and working on challenging

coursework along with their peers in mainstream classrooms.

However, their ability to "read" social situations or communicate their thoughts and feelings in appropriate ways is often lacking. During the teen years, when conformity is key, a lack of ability to blend with their peers can spell trouble.

"When they act inappropriately out of confusion or say something that can seem harsh, this can be misinterpreted or even exploited by other kids," says Mallon who mentions that bullying and harassment are common. "Many of our kids have come to us having had really terrible middle school experiences. Understandably, their ability to trust is just not there."

Without a sense of security, getting to the work of academics can be almost impossible, even for kids with above average intelligence.

Knowing that help from the adults in their lives isn't always what best teaches their teen students, and inspired by research with elementary-age autistic children, Jacobs, Mallon, O'Brien-Teta, and consultant Dr. Gina Cosgrove began their own peer network program. This program, piloted last year, partners some of their special needs students with teens their age from the mainstream population. The primary goal was to create a group of peers who the special needs students could go to for help.

Peers are nominated by their teachers based on characteristics such as maturity, responsibility and sensitivity. These students take part in an orientation when they learn about autism and their roles in the peer network. They also meet throughout the school year with Jacobs and his colleagues to talk about their

experiences, share their frustrations and learn how to work with their special needs classmates more effectively.

"As the teens work together, they come to understand that some of the unusual behavior that kids on the autism spectrum exhibit stems from anxiety. Knowing this can help the teens in the mainstream start to see beyond the eccentricities and begin to appreciate the whole person," says O'Brien-Teta.

"What the kids also learn is that intervention doesn't always have to be something major—sometimes it is as simple as saying "hello" when you pass the other student in the hall or inviting a kid to sit with you at lunch."

Learning first hand about the autism spectrum, the teen mentors report a greater understanding and ability to identify with the challenges that special needs kids face each day. And out of their partnerships, a number of true friendships have grown.

"What I find most endearing about this program," says Dr. Lin Severance, Mohonasen's director of pupil personnel services, "is that we are creating a circle of friends who are more sensitive to the social difficulties and special needs of their classmates. The more they learn, the more protective they become."

"Everyone," Severance concludes, "not just the special needs students, is benefiting from this program."

To learn more about the peer network program, please contact Ken Jacobs, school social worker, at kjacobs@gw.neric.org, or Anne O'Brien-Teta, special education teacher, at aobrient@gw.neric.org. They can also be reached at the Mohonasen High School main phone 356-8300.