



Collaborative Team Teaching

The ASD Nest Program

Part II:

The “Nitty Gritty” - Getting Started

By Patricia Mahalko and Dolores Troy-Quinn

In the last issue of *Autism Asperger's Digest*, we introduced the team teaching ASD Nest Program model at Castlewood School, and identified the ingredients necessary to create a strong collaborative team that would benefit high-functioning children on the autism spectrum. The collaborative mindset stands on the belief that *all* students are better served through the expertise of a team rather than a single educator in a classroom.

We have discovered several essential elements that need to be in place to ensure a successful implementation of this collaborative mindset: a strong vision, buy-in on the part of the stakeholders, a smart and passionate educational team, and appropriately placed students. Even more important is strong leadership – it might be a principal, a regional liaison, or an outside consultant – a person(s) who “sets the tone from the top” in assuring that these essential elements are designed, created, and maintained.

Vision

“If students cannot learn the way we teach them, then we must teach them

the way they learn.” (Dunn 1990) This quote exemplifies the heart of what we believe at the Castlewood School. This was not always so. In the past, children with special needs were segregated, often times put in small, back classrooms, far away from the daily flow of school life. Something needed to happen to change the culture of the school. Although the mission of the school was to develop in all of our students a love of learning and an ability to succeed as contributing citizens of society, we were not living up to our end of the bargain. The ASD Nest Program was the catalyst that made the words of our mission a living reality.

Buy-in

Having a strong vision is a critical piece, but without community buy-in, a vision is just a vision. We campaigned to get all of the stakeholders on board – parents, staff, and students – to see that a collaborative environment was a win-win situation for everyone. Our special needs youngsters would benefit from having neuro-typical peers as role models and our neuro-typical peers would come to realize that the world is made up of many

different types of people. They could appreciate these differences and grow in understanding, sensitivity, and tolerance towards others who might be different in some ways. There is a great advantage for all children in having two skilled educators in the classroom.

Inclusion/diversity models – programs we “expect” to be successful – often falter when classes are introduced in schools without any forethought as to “fit”, and support to educators, parents, and students. Since the ASD Nest Program requires specialized training for teachers and a specific testing protocol used for student selection, we felt it was wise to have the Nest program designers help us decide if the program was a good fit for our school. In hindsight, this step proved invaluable in securing “buy in” for the program.

A year before the anticipated program implementation, Mary Jo Pisacano, our regional liaison, and Dorothy Siegel, the founding “godmother” of the ASD Nest Program, began to hold meetings with our various school groups. They both attended meetings of our school leadership team, our Parent-Teacher

Association, and numerous faculty conferences. They explained how the program would operate and its benefits to the school. They were frank in their assessment that starting a program such as this would not be easy. However, they did say that both they and their team of experts would be on hand to help us transition the following September, when the program would begin. They did not sugarcoat the reality, but they did offer the promise of professional development and in-class support. After much discussion the staff and parents were on board!

Strong Educational Team

In addition to a clear vision and buy-in on the part of all stakeholders, there must be a strong core of highly professional educators and related service providers. As Jim Collins says in his book, *Good to Great*, a vision doesn't really matter if you don't have the "right people on the bus."

So how were these incredible staff members selected? While interviewing potential candidates, three essential factors were considered: a love of children (many candidates say they love children, but in fact, not all do); a strong work ethic (we think about our students at home, in class, and all other times in between); and lifelong passion for learning (many of our special needs youngsters are puzzles that require multiple classroom strategies and "outside the box" thinking to be successful). Of course, there is a long list of other essential qualities too: collaborative spirit, smart, good communication skills, trustworthy, and humble, to name a few. (See Part I: The Mindset, in the July-August issue for more on staff qualities.) Initially, new staff needed to be recruited, as we were adding classes. As the program has grown to capacity over the years and we continue to add ASD Nest classes through the grades, staff have been chosen both internally and from outside the school. Whether a teacher is a new hire or someone from within the school, all staff new to the ASD Nest Program must take the required coursework to participate.

Prior to program implementation, the qualified educators/therapists selected were required to attend rigorous graduate

level training provided by Hunter College, City University of New York. These summer courses allowed all participants to develop a common language and vision for their work in the ASD Nest Program. The coursework addressed autism spectrum disorders, behavioral theory and strategies, classroom structure and management.

In addition to a background in autism and behavioral theory, co-teachers attended professional development sessions on how to effectively function in a co-teaching situation. Much of the professional development was based on the work of Marilyn Friend, author of *The Power of Two*. Both the special educator and the general educator learned the various models of co-teaching, the trials and tribulations of team teaching, and the stages of team development. All of this intense learning provides a strong foundation to sustain our school's vision of a collaborative community.

Student Placement

Students placed in a collaborative setting should be chosen with care to ensure their needs are met and that they will be successful in this type of classroom environment. It is not an appropriate placement for all spectrum students. In the ASD Nest Program students were (and continue to be) selected via a rigorous screening process that includes classroom observation, IQ and educational testing, as well as the administration of the ADOS (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule). This data is reviewed by a central office team of evaluators.

Candidates for the ASD Nest Program are chosen based on the following criteria: no clinically significant delay in cognitive development, language (except for difficulty using language in a social context), self-help skills and adaptive behavior (other than social interaction). Students should be able to fully participate in grade level academics. With appropriate support these students should be able to function as productive members of the class.

When everything works well, it is difficult to discern a typically developing

child from a child with high functioning autism in our school. Yes, some of these students have "meltdowns" and have difficulty with social relationships. However, with the proper strategies and the right level of support, meltdowns decrease and these children develop to their full potential. For example, during a gym period with our first graders, students were expected to find a partner and stand next to him/her for an activity. Within seconds, there was complete mayhem, as students lacked the necessary social skills to select a partner. Immediately, the co-teaching team realized the need for explicit instruction on how to choose a partner. Once the instruction was delivered, the students were able to get into pairs without upset or meltdown. This type of instruction clearly benefited all students, not just those with ASD.

It is disheartening when a student is placed in our program and we are not able to meet his/her needs in the collaborative setting. While great care and effort are placed on adapting the environment, sometimes this is not enough to help the child assimilate. When this has happened at our school, we take data, try various strategies, consult with all team members and involve parents in making the difficult decision to place the child in a more restrictive setting.

The ASD Nest Program has given us the support, structure and ongoing professional development to make our school successful in meeting the needs of all our students, but in particular, our students with ASD. Our school's motto is "The Little School with the Big Heart." By staying true to our vision, keeping all of our stakeholders in the loop, and by selecting and retaining the very best practitioners in the field, we are able to live this motto on a daily basis.

More →

The authors – a special educator and a principal – comprise part of the ASD Nest team at the Castlewood School (PS 186). The Castlewood School is recognized as an exemplary inclusion school by the New York State Education Department.



Tone at the Top

By Dolores Troy Quinn, Castlewood School Principal

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“Oh, it's *those* special ed kids making noise in the hall!” “Our kids can't be in the bathroom or the lunchroom with the special ed kids.” These were the phrases I heard upon entering the doors of Public School 186 as a new principal. Needless to say, I was shocked and appalled at the insensitivity that appeared to be part of the culture of the Castlewood School. While the mission of the school was to “develop in all of our students a love of learning and an ability to succeed as contributing citizens of society” – somewhere along the line, we had forgotten those ideals and the pledge we proclaimed to the Castlewood community. I sensed that we were not holding up our end of the bargain. Yes, our students performed academically. However, we were not addressing the other equally important areas of child development – preparing them to be good citizens of society.

So then, how is it over seven years later we are a school recognized as an exemplary inclusion school by the New York State Education Department? The journey has been spiritually uplifting, and at the same time, fraught with many pitfalls. However, it is, I believe, a journey that has made me a better principal, and enriched the lives of everyone at our school.

Having the expertise and support from outside the school in the early days of program implementation was crucial to our school's success. The predictable “bumps in the road” did not derail the program at this critical juncture. Instead, the hand holding and practical solutions to problems helped our fledgling program flourish. As the ASD Nest Program has expanded, we have steadily built capacity

within our school. Our organization now boasts two teachers with advanced certificates in behavior management as well as a school full of knowledgeable staff members who attend conferences and seek out their own opportunities for professional growth.

Because the ASD Nest Program provided the framework for a well-crafted, thoughtfully considered collaborative program, it was easy to take many of the structures and incorporate them into our other collaborative classes. We now have a common language that most students and staff employ throughout the day – not just in classrooms, but also in the cafeteria, library and playground, too. Working with smart special educators has also had a great impact on other members of the school community. We have had special educators working as co-teachers with our specialist teachers to help them problem solve a difficult behavior. These same ASD Nest educators have shown our lunchroom staff and after school staff how to defuse potential meltdowns and how to help an ASD child make a friend.

The ripple effect of the ASD Nest Program has had a powerful impact on our school. With every passing year, the best practices of the ASD Nest Program touch more and more members of our school community.

I have come a long way since those very first days as a new principal. Our journey to become the caring, Castlewood community that our mission statement defines unfolded step by step, with hard work, passion, and dedication to our purpose. If there is one sentence that sums up what I've learned from this experience it would be this: *All children benefit when a school environment values diversity and is truly inclusive.* ■