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EVERYBODY'S WELCOME

PARKING AUTHORITY: TO BE OR NOT TO BE

WHITE GARDENS

USTA JUNIOR TEAM TENNIS

GET WELL SOON AT THE OFFICE

PLUS...


HEALTH & FITNESS GUIDE

UPTOWN SHOPPING/DINING GUIDE

KIND, PATIENT, etc.

*educating and socializing
children of differing abilities...*

everyone's welcome



Fourth-grader Will Jozwiak knew it was weird at almost 10 years old to be fascinated by The Wiggles, a singing and dancing quartet geared for toddlers. “Mom, I don’t know why,” he would say with frustration to Debbie Jozwiak, who understands that high functioning autism can cause her son to fixate on unusual things.

Happily, instead of allowing Will to feel out of place when he dressed as one of The Wiggles for Halloween, three Howe teachers donned the getups of the other three Wiggles to make a complete set.

“Now does that take your breath away?” asks Debbie appreciatively. And, as a result of briefly indulging Will’s immersion in Wiggledom, he is now over it.

Debbie sees that story as the essence of the school district’s effort to include all students in school activities, whether it’s time for learning or for play.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires schools to “make available to all eligible children with disabilities a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs.” That means a school can’t stick a child with a disability in a room by himself or shuttle him off to a special school, if there is a reasonable way for the student to remain in class with peers. But in Mt. Lebanon School District, “inclusion” is more than just making sure the classroom environment is appropriate.

“Inclusion means understanding and accepting every student who walks in these buildings and letting them know they’re welcome,” says Connie Lewis, Mt. Lebanon’s supervisor of special education.

“We believe in inclusion for several reasons,” says

Superintendent Tim Steinhauer. “First, we know that children with special needs who are included do better academically. But equally as important, we believe inclusion benefits everyone as it promotes understanding, acceptance and hopefully, friendships.” Each of Mt. Lebanon’s 10 schools has an inclusion team composed of regular teachers, special education teachers and administrators. Two district inclusion specialists, one at the elementary level and another at the secondary schools, assist the teams, which meet three times a year.

“We don’t work with kids. We work with teachers so they can work better with kids,” says elementary inclusion specialist Janet Niedzwicki of her job and that of secondary inclusion specialist Jessica Webster. They present programs to educate teachers and coach teachers throughout the year. Sarah McCluan, spokesperson for the Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU), says it is unusual for a district to have even one full-time inclusion specialist, much less two.

The faculty and staff have a menu of programs and resources to help them educate and socialize children of differing abilities. Niedzwicki and Webster are most proud of the district’s co-teaching program, which began at the middle schools in 2002 and teams special education teachers with regular classroom teachers. The program provides “differentiated instruction,” a fancy way of saying that teachers use different methods to teach the same lesson to students of varying abilities. Right now, the district has 17 co-taught classes at the secondary level.

Each elementary school has a learning support program, which provides such services as speech, reading support and occupational therapy, and a guidance counselor. Some schools have magnet programs. Washington Elementary, for example, offers a life skills program that teaches students how to manage everyday challenges and chores. The program works well



Opposite page: Markham school counselor Amy Whealdon leads the first graders through exercises in teamwork as part of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, piloted at that school. Above: instructional support teacher Kim Salvador helps children in the Art Expression program at Jefferson Elementary, where children with disabilities work alongside regular education peers to create art projects that help them share their feelings.

there because the kids can go Uptown and practice things like buying pizza or putting money in the parking meters. (Mellon and the High School also have life skills programs.) At Hoover, there is a special AIU speech and language program for kindergarten and first grade. Other programs such as emotional support, hearing support or autism support are run at each building with the appropriate staff members traveling between schools.

At the heart of educating and including children with disabilities is the Individual Education Program (IEP), a document that spells out what kind of special instruction the student will have, how much time he or she will spend in the regular classroom and who will deliver those services. But again, that's the legal side of things, something the district is required to do. It does not spell out how the school district will make the child feel welcome.

Art Expression is one inclusion program that is so successful it has a waiting list. Started in 2001 by residents James and Angela Lowden, the after-school program brings regular and special education students together, under the guidance of certified art therapists, teachers and volunteers. "I saw that families struggled, children struggled and children weren't included," says Angela Lowden, a former teacher and interior designer. "I'm passionate about this. It's one of the greatest joys of my life to help these children."

During the 90-minute program offered once a week for six weeks during two terms, the kids create an art project where the process is more important than the result. At the seven elementary schools, it is a guided project but at both middle schools, it operates as an open studio. Lowden says she hopes to soon add the program at the high school.

Recent projects included making Komboloi Worry Beads, used for meditation. The children first talked about their nervous habits and shared stories about the things that upset them. Then they created colorful polymer clay beads that are spun on a string to occupy worried fingers. Another project was a tribal stick which the students made as a team, each one adding his or her favorite color wrap onto a stick that represented the tribe. "Enabling children to experience social inclusion and feel like they were a significant member of a team or 'tribe' is one of the many reasons why I love working with Art Expression Inc.," therapist Anna Duchene wrote in a letter to parents that went home with the projects.

For the first four years, the Lowdens paid for the program, but recently the school district has matched their contribution; each party put in \$15,600 this year. Lowden hopes to get donations and grants, as the district isn't going to be able to pay for the program indefinitely. She says she knows the program is worthwhile, not only because of its increasing popularity but because she sees friendships blossom there.

Many inclusionary practices involve problem-solving. For example, at one of the buildings, some of the students were having a hard time coping with the typical chaos of lunchtime. They told the inclusion team it was simply too loud to enjoy lunch. So the team organized an alternate lunch—a quiet place to go with soft music and kids speaking in whispers. It was optional, and it worked.

Some elementary and middle schools have "friendship groups" at lunch, where counselors informally promote interaction between kids with disabilities and their peers. Also both middle schools have a CHEERS program, started a few years ago when several cheerleaders wanted to make sure classmates