

GREAT expectations

...for the success of youth with special needs

The Changing Face of Special Education

Continuing to grow and evolve is a goal we take seriously. Because each of the children, teens and young adults we teach is unique, we know the approaches we use to inspire their learning need to be equally unique and current.

To achieve this, our dedicated teaching staff regularly participates in professional development activities and trainings that ensure the learning your children receive is “up-to-the minute” and most meaningful. Staff also shares what they know with each other, helping these “best educational practices” take hold across our division. Too, we use what we learn from families like yours to improve our programs so they best meet the varied and ever-changing needs of your children.

In this spring issue, we feature a look at what’s new in Special Education—from extracurricular activities that help blur the lines between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers to creative and innovative approaches that are inspiring students with special needs to “find their voices.” We also introduce you to a number of new staff members who are bringing fresh ideas to their classrooms and their students.



What we're about...

Great Expectations is a publication for parents and families of children, teens and young adults in the Capital Region BOCES Special Education program. Issues are published four times each school year.

The Special Education Division recognizes the important role that parents and other family members play as their children's and teen's teachers and role models. So much of what happens at home helps support successful transitions and the learning that happens in the classroom. It also sets the stage for a successful launch into the world away from home.

We hope the information in this publication is useful and helps support the important job you do. We welcome your input and suggestions. If you would like to respond, please contact Christine Carpenter, editor, at (518) 464-6311 or e-mail ccarpent@gw.neric.org.

D/HH children learn their ABCs ...and so much more



A word from the Director

By Inge Jacobs, director of Special Education, Capital Region BOCES

One of the qualities we pride ourselves on at the Capital Region BOCES Special Education Division is continuing to learn and grow as educators in our pursuit of providing the best possible educational experience for your children.

Not only do we take our responsibility to your children very seriously in terms of supporting and challenging their growth and learning, we also apply this same standard to ourselves. We are committed to researching, learning and practicing those instructional methods that will result in our own growth as professionals, and in turn benefit our students, your children.

This issue presents some excellent examples of how we are "pushing our own envelopes" and taking on challenges that are new to us. In the process, we have the opportunity to question what we do professionally and why. This dedication to inquiry and to being our best ultimately helps our students become their best selves, too—it's often a challenge, but always gratifying!

Best wishes for a warm spring!

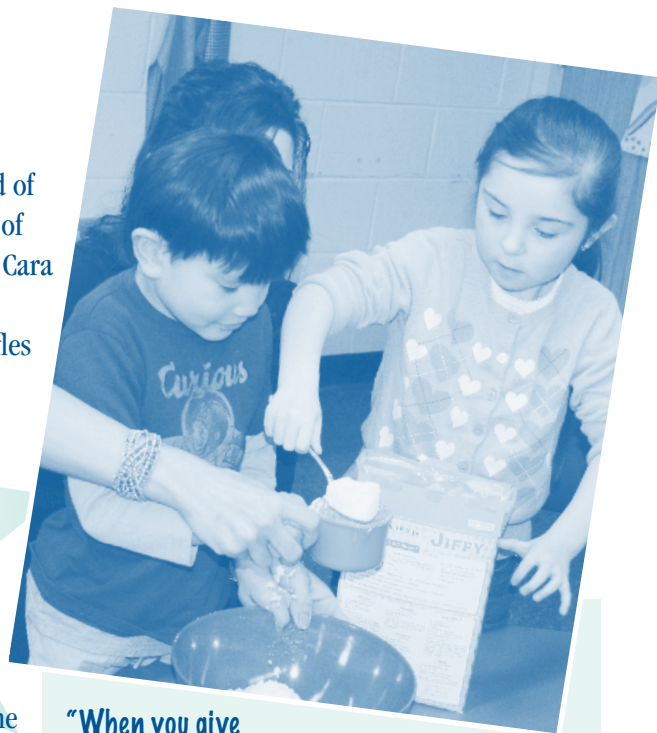
Elementary

It's "W" week in the Deaf/ Hard of Hearing (D/HH) classroom of teachers Laura Cooper and Cara Wolff and what better way to celebrate than by making waffles for snacktime?

Cooking is just one of the many ways the D/HH staff help lay the foundation of skills—both academic and those specific to deafness—their young students will need to be successful learners throughout their school years. On another day, the planting of pea seeds encourages students to speak, develop their vocabulary (expressed in speech and sign language), take turns, work together and practice academic skills such as reading, writing, predicting and observing. On yet another day, a picture book read-aloud becomes a lesson in how to focus on the sign language interpreter so students who haven't yet mastered this skill are more likely to get the full meaning of the book being shared.

"With our youngest deaf and hard of hearing students, the goal is to help them learn the basic academic skills," Cooper explained. She said learning using these skills at a young age puts students in a better position to access a mainstream education as they move into the upper elementary, middle and high school years.*

"As we have done in the past," Cooper said, "we continue to have the expertise



"When you give children language, you give them power," said Laura Cooper, elementary teacher of the deaf. "We believe that a language rich environment helps move all children forward academically, regardless of their ability level."

Above, Jack Lisella and Olivia Cornell, students in Cooper and Wolff's D/HH class, help make waffles—a cooking project that was instructional and yummy!

and capability to educate students with both cochlear implants and traditional hearing aids who are cognitively able to benefit from mainstreaming opportunities with a sign language interpreter."

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of students who are learning within the D/HH program who are not only deaf or hard of hearing but may also have vision loss, motor difficulties and/or cognitive delays. This has presented a new set of challenges, in terms of making sure that each student in the class is getting what he or she most needs to learn well. "The beauty of

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Buddy programs build “bridges” for students

Middle School

Social worker Lucy Brady knows how important being accepted into one’s communities can be for children and teens with special needs: in addition to working to expand such opportunities for her special education students at Van Antwerp Middle School in Niskayuna, Brady is the mother of and advocate for a teenage daughter, Christina, who attends BOCES special education classes at Scotia-Glenville High School.

This is why Brady is encouraged that Best Buddies—an extracurricular program that helps create friendships, employment and leadership opportunities for students and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities—is available to the middle schoolers she works with at Van Antwerp and that her daughter and her classmates have similar opportunities at Scotia.

Five years ago, Brady helped organize a Best Buddies NY chapter for her sixth, seventh and eighth grade special education students and their Van Antwerp peers. Best Buddies programs are also available at some of the other sites where BOCES special education classes are held.

At Van Antwerp, over 40 “peer buddies”—this school does not make a distinction between the disabled and non-disabled students who participate—meet twice a month to share lunch, conversation and hone their Uno skills, among other games and activities. They also take a fun end of the year trip together.

“Best Buddies is very much about the students having face-to-face time with each other,” Brady explained. “One of the biggest advantages of this program for the special education students is having peers who they get to know well and talk with

“One of the biggest advantages of the Best Buddies program for the special education students is having peers who they get to know well, who they can say ‘hi’ to when they pass in the hall and talk with in a comfortable way during our gatherings,” explained BOCES Social Worker Lucy Brady.

Here, seventh-grade “peer buddies” Jeffrey Kemp and Brandon MacDonald share lunch, conversation and a game of Uno.



in a comfortable way during our gatherings. The lunches are great because there is a lot of spontaneous interaction. This can encourage similar interactions when the students see each other in the hall or class.”

At Scotia-Glenville, Christina Brady and her classmates also have the opportunity to participate in activities and school-based jobs with their non-disabled through the high school’s GIVE program. Nan Ciarlone, Christina’s special education teacher, says this type of program, which has a peer component similar to Best Buddies, and the relationships it helps build is of great value for the students who participate—and the rest of the school’s students and staff.

“The GIVE program has been very successful in bringing my students together with the Scotia-Glenville students and showing that they are all just teenagers who are more alike than some would think. Too, the GIVE students have also helped to educate others in the school building about working with children with developmental disabilities—making the positive impact of the program that much greater,” Ciarlone said.

Elementary

Continued from page 2

our classes is that they are language-rich and flexible spaces where we use lots of different tools and techniques to help the group grow together, despite each student’s unique differences,” Cooper said.

In response to this challenge, D/HH class sizes at the elementary level will be reduced to an eight student, one teacher, two aide ratio (8:1:2) for September 2011.

** A unique aspect of the BOCES Special Education D/HH program is that all classes, pre-kindergarten through high school, are housed within the Guilderland school district. This ensures that students move through their school years with their peers and have a sense of continuity in terms of learning strategies, level-to-level.*

From high school senior to motivational speaker



High School

At the end of this school year, senior Melanie Hecker, who attends the BOCES special education Interdisciplinary Skills Program (ISP) class of teacher Andy Lockwood at Bethlehem High School, will graduate with a NYS Regents diploma. Like many other students her age, Melanie's plan is to attend college in the fall—she has her sights set on Hudson Valley Community College (HVCC) where she hopes to earn a degree in diagnostic medical (ultrasound) sonography technology.

Unlike her peers, Melanie also plans to expand her role as a speaker on the topic of living with Asperger's Syndrome in the "neuro-typical" world and to advocate for others on the autism spectrum who may not have the ability to speak for themselves.

Not one to wait—Melanie "knows for a fact" that public speaking is her true calling—she will launch into the national spotlight the week before graduation with a lunchtime address at the National Association for the Dually Diagnosed (NADD) symposium in Boston. Over the past two years, Melanie has spoken numerous times at Skidmore College in Saratoga and at other local organizations on behalf of ASPIRe NY—a community-based recreation and activity group for teens and young adults with Asperger's and other autism-related disorders. She was also the 2010 recipient of the Lt. John Finn Community Service Award presented by the Albany County Youth Bureau for her significant volunteer contributions to her community.

"Melanie walks a fine line between the disabled and mainstream world," said her mother Phyllis Hecker, who credits Melanie's doctors, social workers and the BOCES teachers and staff who have supported her since she was a preschooler with helping Melanie blossom into the poised, confident and successful student is. "We are proud of Melanie and all of her accomplishments and excited she has the opportunity to speak at NADD about living with Asperger's and to represent those who may not have the ability to speak for themselves."



"I know for a fact that I'm able to persuade people with my voice and to advocate for people with Asperger's and who are dually-diagnosed. There are many people with autism spectrum disorders who don't have the ability to speak for themselves—this is why it is so important for me to speak for myself and for them," said senior Melanie Hecker, who will graduate from her BOCES special education program this summer and plans to become a motivational speaker and advocate for people living with autism.



At www.capregboces.org/speced/ you'll learn about the many programs for students and resources for families the Special Education division has to offer.

Music makes learning more meaningful

Alternative Assessment

On a typical day in the Comprehensive Development Skills (CDS) classroom of teacher Kris Jones, students and staff can be heard lifting their voices—to say good morning and welcome each other to a new school day, to learn the days of the week, make predictions about the weather and to keep track of the ingredients and steps needed to bake a vanilla cake for snack time.

“I try to keep things lighthearted, even a little silly,” explained Jones, who has been using music as a teaching method since her first days as a special education teacher 20 years ago. “An ability to communicate is so important for our students and the more opportunities we give them to ‘find their voices,’ the more successful they will be with us, once they head to a high school setting and after they’ve graduated from our programs.”

A significant focus of Jones’ CDS program is to help the students learn to be more socially skilled, work as part of a group, make friends, use their voices or other cues to express their needs and wants, and to feel comfortable with basic life skills (for example, choosing what to eat for lunch, helping with their dressing and self-care, picking a learning center to spend time in or preparing a simple meal.)

“Throughout the day, we offer our students many opportunities to make choices, work together as a group and expand their verbal and non-verbal communication,” Jones explained. “I have found that music makes this learning more fun and helps keep the students engaged in a way that speaking doesn’t always achieve.”



“The more opportunities we give students to ‘find their voices,’ the more successful they will be with us, once they head to a high school setting and after they’ve graduated from our programs,” said Kris Jones, special education teacher. Here, student Anthony DiDonna, teaching assistant Kayla Bisailon and Jones (pictured with guitar) sing a good morning song with the class.

Mark  **your calendar!**

July 5 Special Education Extended School Year (ESY) summer school classes begin

August 12 Special Education Extended School Year (ESY) school classes end

For more information, call the Committee on Special Education (CSE) chairperson in your school district or call (518) 464-6394.

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Meet our New teachers...

This winter, **Doreen Seymour** joined the BOCES Special Education staff as a teacher of the visually impaired (TVI). Her work as a teacher of the visually impaired includes: obtaining eye reports and assessing a child's vision in the educational setting, ordering braille and LP books, supplying teachers with equipment specific to the student's visual and academic needs, stimulating the visual function to the multiply impaired and writing vision goals and providing direct service with students as outlined on their IEP.

Prior to joining BOCES, she worked as a high school economics and U.S. history teacher in Belmont, New Hampshire and as a teacher of the visually impaired with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired and with the Piedmont Regional Education Program in Virginia. She currently works with students in

Schoharie, Schenectady and Albany counties.

"Every child is unique in terms of the gifts he or she bring as a learner and each child's visual needs effect him or her differently even if they share the same eye condition. I enjoy watching each individual's potential always unfolding...No day in the life of a TVI is boring; there is always a new challenge that presents itself," Seymour said.

This winter, **Cara Wolff** joined the deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) teaching staff based at Westmere Elementary School in Guilderland. Before joining BOCES, Wolff taught for many years as a preschool teacher at Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens, New York. She was also a teacher of the deaf at Capital District Beginnings in the Capital Region. She says these experiences and a true love of work-

ing with young children, as well as her own experiences as a deaf individual (Wolff began losing her hearing as a teen and has constant tinnitus) have helped influence her teaching of the kindergartners she now works with.

"I love teaching and working through challenges. Each of the students is an individual and may require different strategies to help him or her understand a concept. I enjoy the 'ah-ha' moment of seeing a student understand something or using a new vocabulary word appropriately. I also enjoy being able to connect with them on a certain level. When the students see that I have hearing aids like they do, most of the time they appear so excited and surprised. I think it is important for them to see that people of all ages wear hearing aids and that they can accomplish anything they set their mind to," said Wolff.