Cases of autism have increased dramatically over the past decade. The latest statistics from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) state that one in every one hundred and fifty children are now being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. There is a Nationwide movement to improve services for children with autism.

In an effort to increase awareness of autism and to help enhance services for students with autism, the Region 1 Schools in Virginia have joined together and formed an Educational Consortium. This is an exciting new concept in Central Virginia. I am pleased to be the Facilitator of the Consortium! The participating schools districts are:

- Charles City
- Chesterfield
- Colonial Heights
- Dinwiddie
- Goochland
- Hanover
- Henrico
- Hopewell
- New Kent
- Petersburg
- Powhatan
- Prince George
- Richmond
- Surry
- Sussex

The Superintendents and other key personnel in each of the above mentioned school divisions have been extremely supportive of this new initiative. Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has also partnered with the participating school districts. Look for this quarterly newsletter as a source of information about what is happening around the region.

Thanks!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Autism

Parent/Teacher Relations—You Can Do It!

One of the quickest ways to help gain positive parent/teacher relations is to establish clear communication. Often times, students in our classrooms are unable to communicate with their parents on what happened in school. Parents are entrusting you with their children, so make sure that the line of communication is open and that they feel comfortable. Pick up the telephone and introduce yourself, write a personalized note or set up meet and greets at the beginning of the school year.

Remember a little goes a long way!!!!
Ten Ways to Start the School Year off Great!

Starting the year off on the right foot is everyone’s goal. Here are ten things to consider as you are starting out a new school year:

1. **Get to know your students:** Reviewing your students' IEP's is extremely important. You have just come back after a long rest, so it is a good idea to get refamiliarized with your students’ IEP’s.

2. **Clear room arrangement and structure:** Students with autism tend to respond better to a structured, predictable environment. Try to have your room structured so that they understand what is expected of them throughout the day. This may also help them be more independent as they make transitions within your classroom environment.

3. **Schedules:** September can be a challenging time in any classroom as you are trying to figure out how to fit in all of the academic times, lunch time, recess, resources, etc. You may need to tweak your schedule numerous times before finding one that really works for you and your students. Once you find a schedule, stick to it as much as you can for consistency.

4. **Groupings:** Grouping your students can be challenging but very worthwhile in the long run. Consider your individual students strengths and needs and group them accordingly.

You can group according to grade level so that they will have age-appropriate peers to model.

5. **Make friends with your general education colleagues:** No longer are the times when special education teachers are separated from the general education teachers. You all need to work together. Building a strong collegial relationship will help all involved!

6. **Get ready for “rainy days”:** As you are planning your lessons, be sure to take into consideration times when you may be absent or when the weather is not very cooperative. “Rainy day” plans should be available in a place in your classroom that is easy to find. Of course, these activities need to be educational but they can be fun, fun, fun!

7. **Get organized:** A clean, organized classroom will help you and your students feel more comfortable with the classroom environment. It will also make it easier to find things when it becomes hectic!

8. **Get to know the general education curriculum:** Whether you are teaching to the SOLs or to the ASOLs, you will need to know the curriculum. Gather needed materials. Work with your administrators and general education colleagues to help make sure you have all that is needed to teach the lessons effectively.

9. **Collect data:** Start collecting data as soon as you can! It is extremely important to have data to support progress and to show you where you may need to slow down and stress concepts that are needed for mastery. Don’t forget to take data on IEP goals and objectives. Data can also be kept on behavioral concerns to help decrease the likelihood of negative behaviors occurring.

10. **Have fun!** Lastly, have fun with your students. The more energetic you are the more successful the school day will be.

“Take a deep breath, count to ten, and tackle each task one step at a time.” Linda Shalaway

A Shout Out Goes To!

A huge Welcome Back and Thank You goes out to all of the teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, etc.! You all are what makes a difference in students’ lives each and every day. Your jobs are extremely important, so I wanted to acknowledge you all in the first newsletter.

If you have any special news that you would like to share in future newsletters, please e-mail me and I will be sure to “shout out” to you all. It is always nice to hear positive things that you or your colleagues are doing.

My e-mail is:

radiganct@vcu.edu

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Upcoming events

On-going staff development is an important part of being an effective teacher. There are many training opportunities available around the region. Look to this section in future newsletters to help you find workshops and trainings that you may want to attend.

On November 4, 2008, the consortium is having a workshop for participating school districts in Region 1. It will be held in Hanover at the Richmond Times Dispatch Building from 9:00-4:00. Some of the topics included in this workshop are: information from the Virginia Department of Education, data collection, and best practices in the classroom.

On November 14, 2008, the consortium is sponsoring a training designed for invited Region 1 school psychologists and diagnosticians. The focus of this training is assessment for students with autism spectrum disorder. Dr. Linda Bourdon, from Southeastern Cooperative Education Program (SECEP) located in Norfolk, Va., will be our guest presenter. The training will be held in Hopewell, Virginia. More information about both of these trainings will be coming to you through your local school division.

As a effort to work together with other school divisions in Region 1, several of the school divisions have agreed to open up their local trainings to others in the region. These trainings will be listed on the website. If you have any information that you would like to share with others regarding training opportunities, please feel free to contact me at: radiganct@vcu.edu.

Resources

There are numerous resources available. Here is a brief list of some of them:

www.autismtrainingva.org is a wonderful website. It is the website for the Virginia Autism Council. Trainings are listed as well as other resources such as college courses on autism and tuition reimbursement.

T/TAC has a plethora of information on various disabilities. There are on-line courses and information about trainings and workshops. You can go to www.ttaconline.org or www.vcu.edu/ttac.org.

Here are some other websites that you may find helpful:

www.doe.virginia.gov
www.autismspeaks.org
www.varc.org
www.autismva.org
www.dotolearn.com
www.mayer-johnson.com
www.researchautism.org
www.tonyattwood.com.au
www.lindahodgdon.com

Community-Based Instruction

Getting your students out in the community is an important part of helping them learn to generalize skills.

For instance, here are three simple steps for teaching students how to order food in a restaurant. First, start by having your students order lunch in your classroom. During this time, they could use a menu that you prepare and also pay for the food. Next, you could start working on this skill in the cafeteria. They could order off a menu and pay the cashier for their food. Remember to use communication systems they need to order their food items (i.e. pointing, voice output device, talking, etc.). Lastly, work on the skill in the community at a restaurant. Some restaurants such as MacDonald’s have visual menus available. Computer programs such as Boardmaker can help when developing communication boards for your students.

Generalization of these types of skills is not only beneficial to your students but also to their families.

Research shows that community-based instruction is more effective if you pair a simulated experience along with community-based instruction (Bates, Cuvo, Miner, & Korbbeck, 2001).
The Autism Educational Consortium established the Board of Directors in June of 2008. The consortium’s guiding principles are as follows:

1. Assist each participating School Division in the design and implementation of a comprehensive program of instruction and supports for children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

2. Focus will be on defining model services for students with ASD and supporting classrooms in which these model services are delivered.

3. Commitment to evidence-based practices that will result in documented outcomes for students with ASD.

4. Recognition that comprehensive educational programs for students with ASD will require that all professionals working with students with ASD will participate in on-going professional development activities.

How Full Is Your Bucket?

How many of you prefer to be around people who have a positive outlook on life than people who have a negative outlook on life? Recently, I read the book “How Full Is Your Bucket” by Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton. They use the concept of filling and emptying a bucket. If you have a positive encounter with another person then you are filling their bucket as well as your bucket. If you have a negative encounter then you are taking out of the other person’s bucket. The idea is to keep the buckets as full as possible.

Think about how many interactions you have at work. Many of you work with others in your classrooms. There may be a multitude of people in and out of the classroom all day long—teachers, para-professionals, speech therapists, administrators, etc. Rath and Clifton refer to a study by Gottman. Gottman’s study referred to the term “magic ratio”. He began his study by looking at interactions among married couples. He determined that if the couples had a “magic ratio” of 5 positives to 1 negative then the marriage would be less likely to end in a divorce. Next, he moved his study to the workplace. He found that the ratio of 3:1 (positives to negatives) in respect to interactions led to stronger more productive teams.

So, how does this relate to you all? Take note of your relationships and interactions with your colleagues. Are they generally positive? Or is there a lot of negativity? How much more pleasant would work be if people were more positive toward one another?

This can also spill over to the students in your classroom. The more positive the interactions, the more productive your students will become. Another study was mentioned in the book about students doing math problems. The students that were praised for their hard work showed a 71% improvement and were much more likely to do better on tests. What an easy way to lift your students’ grades and SOL scores!

I would like to send out a challenge to you. Fill someone’s bucket immediately after reading this article. This could be a nice note (“Thanks for making the copies yesterday, that was a huge help!”) or by saying something nice to a student or colleague or maybe even your spouse.

Have fun filling other buckets while getting yours filled too!!!