Welcome Back!

Welcome back to all of you for a new and exhilarating school year!!! This time of year is filled with much anticipation. Teachers are anxiously awaiting the arrival of their new students. Students are eagerly waiting for the school bus to arrive to take them to school after a long summer off.

Keep in mind that the hard work that you put in now will certainly pay off as the year progresses. Schedules may change as you get to know your students and their capabilities. That’s okay. Being consistent and positive will help you develop and maintain a nurturing learning environment in which your students are sure to flourish.

Get out there and meet your special and general education colleagues. It is important to not only build relationships with your students and their parents but also with the other staff in your school. You may find that these relationships will open up more opportunities for your students.

I am looking forward to working with each of you and your school districts again this year! Many of you attended summer trainings. I can’t wait to hear about how you and your students are doing.

We have many exciting things planned for this year. Look to the Region 1 Autism Education website at www.soe.vcu.edu/acc for upcoming events.

Have a wonderful start to the 2010-2011 school year!

Thanks!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

Parent/Teacher Relations—You Can Do It!

As the school year is beginning, many teachers will be getting students in their classrooms which they are unfamiliar. It may be very helpful to send home a survey for the parents/students to fill out to give you some much needed information. Some sample questions are:

- How do you learn best?
- What upsets you?
- What do you need to be comfortable in my classroom?
- What is your favorite part of the school day? Least favorite?
- How do you best communicate?

Working as a team will help your students be successful!

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Special points of interest:

This issue focuses on ideas for starting the school year off on a positive note. There are tips on how to make literacy a part of your day. You will also find information on what’s happening around the state as well as ideas for how to implement visual supports.

Articles are always welcomed! Also welcomed are “shout outs” to your peers. If you would like to submit any information for future issues, please contact me at: radiganct@vcu.edu.
Make Literacy a Part of the Day

Teaching literacy is an important part of the school day. It can be embedded throughout the day. The following are some suggestions that can help you develop a literacy rich environment:

1. Label, label, label. Consider labeling materials in your classroom. You can label just about anything. For instance, label your students’ art materials (scissors, crayons, etc.). Other things that can be labeled are areas of the room (reading table, art table, snack table, etc.). Labeling materials and areas will not only help students better understand that the written word means something, but it will also help you organize your classroom.

2. Use picture books to help with early literacy skills. Picture books combine words and pictures to tell a story. Typically, the pictures in these books are as important as the text. They help the student understand the central meaning of the story. Picture books are often used in elementary schools, but can effectively be used for middle and high school students as well. For older students, always keep in mind age appropriateness of the books.

3. Rhythm and movement may be useful in teaching students literacy. For instance, have them clap out the syllables in their own name and in their classmates’ names. At first, this can be done in unison with the teacher. As they become more familiar with the technique, they can then do this with other less familiar words. Building songs and chants into instruction is not only appropriate at the younger grades but also for older students. For example, having students chant more difficult vocabulary such as photosynthesis may help them be able to recall the word when they come across it at a later date. Often, students with autism have difficulty learning to read phonetically. They might require repetition of activities more so than their peers. Celebrate the small successes, but keep in mind that they often will learn better through print-based experiences.

4. In order to be able to do phonics, students need to be able to recognize the letters in print. Using a variety of materials will not only make your lessons more fun, but may help your students progress more readily. For example, use playdough to have students form the letters of the alphabet. This allows them to feel and see the letter.

5. Have a variety of alphabet books available for students to browse. If you can find books that focus on your students’ individual interests then they may be more likely to look at the books. For example, if your student is in to transportation, then find an ABC book on transportation. ABC books can be created for students at the higher grades to help them learn new or more difficult concepts. For instance, an ABC book for new vocabulary in chemistry may be very beneficial to help students take in the difficult vocabulary (e.g. A is for Argon, B is for Bromine).

6. Have activities available that allow students to sort and categorize patterns and features of letters and words. One example is to give students a number of cards that have letters on them. Have them make as many words as they can out of the letters. Another example is to give the students word cards and have them sort them according to features such as all the words that begin with “c” or by word families (“at”, “an”). They can also sort according to syllables, short and long vowel sounds, etc.

7. Play games in your class that support literacy instruction. For example, have students go on a “mission” to find things that start with a certain letter. Another idea is to play hide and seek with word or letter cards. Students are sure to enjoy playing these games while learning to read.

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Upcoming events

The fall months will bring several professional staff development opportunities that are being sponsored by the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium.

On November 2, 2010, Commonwealth Autism Service will be presenting on scheduling your school day to support your students, teaching in the natural environment, prompting, reinforcement and data. This workshop will be held in Dinwiddie at the Jr. High School and is open to Region 1 Autism Education Consortium staff. It will be free of charge.

On November 8-9 or 10-11, 2010, a training will be conducted for selected staff on Quality Behavioral Competencies. Participants of this training will become train the trainer certified. Topics include reinforcement, prompting and fading. This is for a very limited number of participants. It is free of charge and will be held in Colonial Heights at the Technical Center.

Also in November, we are pleased to welcome back Andrew Bondy, Ph.D who, along with Lori Frost will be conducting a two day Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) Basic Training. Dr. Bondy and Ms. Frost are the co-creators of PECS. The training is scheduled for November 29-30, 2010. There is no charge for this training. Chester Baptist Church is the location for this intensive training.

Please contact Carrie Radigan at (804) 828-4501 or radiganct@vcu.edu if you would like to register for any of these events or if you have with any questions. You will find flyers for these professional staff development opportunities on the Autism Education Consortium’s website: www.soe.vcu.edu/aec.

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.ttaonline.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

What’s New Around the State

As many of you may already know, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) has been working diligently to help improve services for students with autism. There are a couple of projects that VDOE is currently working on with Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU).

First, VDOE and VCU have developed Guidelines for Educating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. These guidelines should be out for public viewing in the next month. VDOE is going to provide a summary of the guidelines at the T/TAC Insight Conference in October.

VDOE has provided funding for another project that VCU is leading. VDOE and VCU have established the Center of Excellence for Autism Spectrum Disorders. According to recent press releases, VCU’s school of education and medicine have established this center to serve as a research and training hub for schools. Six staff members will be hired and embedded into school systems around the state to help train staff in effective research based strategies.

These are exciting times in the field of Autism. Stay tuned for more information.
The Autism Educational Consortium established the Board of Directors in June of 2008. The Consortium’s guiding principles are as follows:

1. The Consortium will assist participating school divisions in designing and implementing a comprehensive program of instruction which utilizes evidence-based practices that will result in documented outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder.

2. The Consortium will support the implementation of high-quality services for students with autism spectrum disorder in member school divisions.

3. The Consortium will recognize that comprehensive educational programs for students with autism spectrum disorder will require that all professionals working with these students to participate in on-going professional staff development activities.

Visual Strategies for Success!

New school year, new students, new opportunities to implement visual strategies in your classroom to help your students be even more successful this school year. What kinds of visuals should you be focusing on? First, check your students’ I.E.P.’s to see if anything special is written that they have been using in the past or what accommodations there are that will need to be implemented. Next, talk to last year’s teacher, if possible, to see if there was anything that was used successfully in the past.

Once you have gathered the background knowledge needed to begin, consider the following visual strategies:

- Student schedules. These can be done in a variety of ways and really depends on the strengths of your students. Schedules can range from using objects to pictures to written words. Using schedules will help your students organize his/her day and help them become more independent learners.

- Consider adding visual supports to your teaching. For example, if you are reading a big book to the class, allow your student with autism to have a small copy of the book or some visuals that go along with the story. This may help him be more attentive to the instruction.

- Make brand new reinforcement systems for you students. It is always nice to have something fresh and new to pull out at the beginning of the school year. Not to mention, your students may have different needs that can be addressed through a new system. For example, last year, your student may have needed a reinforcer after every 2 stickers and this year he can wait until 3 stickers. Thus a new system is needed.

- Make new communication pictures when necessary. There is nothing worse than looking at a communication picture that has food all over it. That is what happens as students successfully use their pictures. Start the year with fresh ones and replenish as needed.

- Students that are included in general education classes may also benefit from using visual strategies. Try to make these usable for the student while not making it too obvious that the student is using something different. Rules cards and schedules can be easily attached to the inside of an agenda book.

Sometimes simple things go a long way. Try implementing more visual strategies than you did last year. Watch how your students succeed!