Welcome!

The 2010-2011 school year has gotten off to a busy start. This is the third year that the Region 1 Autism Education Consortium has been in existence and it is perhaps the busiest yet! Thanks to ongoing support from each of the fifteen school districts (Charles City, Chesterfield, Colonial Heights, Dinwiddie, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, Hopewell, New Kent, Petersburg, Powhatan, Prince George, Richmond City, Surry and Sussex) training on research-based strategies continues to be the focus of the Consortium.

This year, we have had the pleasure of having international speakers come and train on the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS). We have also continued training school staff in the administration of the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS). The ADOS is considered the “gold standard” in regards to evaluating individuals with autism. Training will continue in January when Dr. Donald Oswald returns for another ADOS administration training.

The consortium has a wonderful staff development opportunity scheduled for the Spring. Paula Kluth, Ph.D., who is well known in the field of autism and is an international speaker, will be presenting two days in March. The first day will focus on inclusive services and the second day will focus on literacy instruction. Her energetic and knowledgeable presentations are sure to be a worthwhile experience for those who are able to attend.

One of the goals of the consortium is to support the implementation of high-quality services for students with autism spectrum disorder. The consortium continues to work with partners such as Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to help stay current in what is happening around Virginia.

The consortium strives to give individualized attention to each member school division while also offering intensive training on research-based strategies. We continue to provide high quality trainings from experts in the field at no cost to participants.

I hope that you all have a wonderful restful holiday season!

Carrie Radigan
Facilitator, Region 1 Autism Education Consortium

Parent/Teacher Relations

Paula Kluth is coming! The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium is working with the Region 1 Parent/Teacher Resource Centers to provide a training for parents. Dr. Kluth is an internationally respected educator and researcher. She is also a very dynamic speaker! Dr. Kluth will be speaking on March 21, 2011 from 6:30-8:30pm at the Fulghum Center in Chesterfield County. Her discussion will focus on her book “Just Give Him the Whale!” Parents are invited free of charge to attend this wonderful training.

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Special points of interest:

This issue focuses on what is happening around Virginia to improve services for individuals with autism, upcoming events and computer-aided learning.

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.
The Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) by Dawn Hendicks, Ph.D.

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) awarded Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) a grant to create the VCU Autism Center of Excellence (VCU-ACE). This is a new initiative coordinated through the VCU School of Education’s Rehabilitation Research and Training Center. The VCU-ACE was created to address the growing and diverse population of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Commonwealth and to help ensure each receives a quality education. The ACE mission is to build state- and system-wide capacity to improve individual outcomes through four activities:

- Research
- Training
- Technical Assistance
- Collaboration

Research

VCU-ACE is currently engaging in research to identify evidence-based practices for individuals with ASD across the age range and spectrum. The center is currently engage in four funded research projects from the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research regarding autism and the transition from school to work and post-secondary education.

Technical Assistance

Technical assistance will be provided to school divisions ready to engage in systems change to improve programming for students with ASD. Through the activity, VCU-ACE will focus on long-term systems change that will result in improvements in services for students with ASD. Past efforts in Virginia have been either classroom or student specific. Thus, while individual classroom teachers and Individualized Education Program Staff may have increased their skills, improvement in services has not spread to other classrooms, programs or school divisions. Consequently, VCU has designed intervention to invoke systems change at three levels; school division-wide, regional and across the entire Commonwealth.

School Division Wide Technical Assistance will be provided to selected school divisions and will involve top-level directors, administrators, and teachers to improve their understanding of the implementation of evidence based practices for students with ASD across the age range. VCU-ACE will select 4-8 school divisions in year one who are the best fit for a long-term commitment to systems change.

Regional Technical Assistance will be completed through the development and facilitation of communities of practice designed to foster skill development, problem solving, information and resource acquisition, and integration of learning through both collaborative and self-directed learning activities. This level of TA will involve master teachers, special education specialists, and autism specialists.

Statewide Technical Assistance will provide limited TA related to individual questions and concerns that may arise from other school divisions seeking information related to evidence based practice for individuals with ASD. VCU-ACE will field and respond to questions from individual school divisions through the development of a rich collection of training activities and resources.

Training

A comprehensive state-wide program of training activities will be provided for educators, paraeducators, professionals, and family members. Training is provided on topics related to ASD and evidence based practices including applied behavior analysis (ABA). Training activities will include college coursework to be taken for credit as well as a host of online training activities.

College Coursework will be provided at institutes of higher education throughout the Commonwealth. A consortium will provide guidance on this measure ensuring coursework is available to all relevant stakeholders who provide service to a person with ASD and is accessible.

Online Training will include a variety of activities including webcasts by state and national experts, online seminars, and online courses. Training will be provided on a range of topics relevant to this population.

Collaboration with Stakeholders

Throughout these activities, VCU-ACE will collaborate with stakeholders who share our passion and interest regarding the education of students with ASD. Collaboration will involve many formal and informal activities that will enhance service delivery to those on the spectrum.

A Shout Out Goes To!

Congratulations goes out to Maria Fiden for winning a 2010 R.E.B. award. Ms. Fiden is a teacher of students with autism in Hanover County. She will receive a $9,500 award that will enable her to visit the Minds and Hearts Clinic in Australia. The facility focuses on all aspects of autism and Asperger’s Disorder. This is a great opportunity!

In January, 2011, Region 1 will have two cohort groups starting with VCU. Staff from Chesterfield, Colonial Heights, Hanover, Sussex, Dinwiddie and Powhatan will be taking four courses to earn their certificate in Autism Spectrum Disorders. The staff enrolling in these courses should be commended for their extra efforts to become more highly skilled in their chosen field. Way to go!
Upcoming events

The Region 1 Autism Education Consortium is pleased to announce several upcoming staff development opportunities:

Donald Oswald, Ph.D. will be conducting a training on the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) on January 25th and 27th, 2010. This is open to Region 1 Staff. A very limited number of slots are available.

On January 31, 2010, Carol Schall, Ph.D. will be speaking on Transition and Self Determination. The training will take place in Sussex, Va. at their School Board Office from 9:00-3:30pm. This training is designed for Middle and High School Staff members.

Lastly, Paula Kluth is coming to us for two training dates, March 21-22, 2010. Day one will focus on Inclusive Practices and Day two will focus on Literacy Instruction. Individuals can sign up for one or both days.

Please contact Carrie Radigan with any questions or to register at radiganct@vcu.edu or (804) 828-4501.

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

Check out Paula Kluth’s book: “Just Give Him the Whale”, by Paula Kluth, Ph.D. and Patrick Schwarz, Ph.D. This book gives ideas on how to use fascinations and areas of expertise to support students with autism.

Computer-Aided Instruction

Since 1980, computer-aided instruction has been used systematically in special education. Numerous studies have been conducted with results showing that use of computers have helped students with autism improve academic skills as well as communication. The National Professional Development Center lists computer-aided instruction as an evidence based practice. It is also listed on the National Autism Council’s Standards’ Report as an emerging practice.

There are computer programs available that work on different skills. One program that focuses on academic instruction is Teachtown. This program uses concepts of applied behavior analysis (prompting, fading, use of reinforcement) to teach academic skills. Research on computer-aided learning shows that individuals with autism attend to the computer thus it may help to improve skills. Teachtown has also recently released a social skills curriculum that is taught primarily on the computer.

In New Kent County Public Schools, Smartboards have been installed in the special education classrooms. Students are now able to work on the computer programs on the large board while a touch screen allows them to answer questions as well as interact with the computer program.

(continued on page 4)
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.

Computer-Aided Instruction (continued from page 3)

During a recent visit to New Kent County Public Schools, a Smartboard was being used in a classroom for students with autism. The students took turns completing their lesson on Teachtown. Not only did they take their turns, but they seemed genuinely interested in the program. Each time the program would start, all the students walked over to the Smartboard as if they were ready to take their turn—or volunteer for another turn. The motivation for the program was evident in the students’ behaviors.

As you can see in the following picture, the student is independently making a correct choice—matching the unicorn to the letter “u”. He worked for approximately 20 minutes without assistance from the teacher. Reinforcers were built into his lesson which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy on the large touch screen.

The Smartboard was also used for other lessons such as this math lesson:

Being creative with your teaching is only going to help your students be better learners. Motivation and attention are two factors that can influence whether a student is going to learn. Using different modalities to teach such as hands on activities and activities that incorporate a lot of visuals are sure to help your students achieve. Computer-aided learning is supported by research. It is also fun! So have fun with your students and use your computers when possible.