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Inclusion/ Intervention/ Autism
Rosemary Palisay, Principal
Van Lunen Fellows Project—July, 2009

Using an inclusion model approach to education, Eden II has collaborated with St. John's Lutheran School, integrating autistic students with their typically developing peers. Students from Eden II visit St. John's for certain subjects and others are enrolled as full time students. During our three year partnership, a campaign began to familiarize the public on the many spectrums of autism. Students from St. John's listened to a presentation by Randi Horowitz, associate executive director of Eden II, who explained "that children with autism may have difficulty socializing, communicating and behaving, but are really no different than others." St. John's students decided to raise funds for autism awareness by selling bracelets to family and friends. They raised \$550. Currently there are five students with autism at St. John's.

Our current project is renting space (300-500 sq ft) for 6-8 students to be utilized as a Resource Room for Eden II students. Eden II is responsible to fully staff this program, but students would also utilize all common areas (gym, lunch, etc.) alongside St. John's students. All necessary paperwork has been filed and reviewed by both lawyers and insurance companies. We have a verbal agreement from the State Education Department and are awaiting written confirmation to complete this phase for the 2009-2010 school term. Future plans include an integrated preschool program on the grounds of St. John's. We have already spoken with our Congressman to discuss possible funding to add additional space to house this program. Projected completion of this project is 2011.

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Project background: Autism is the fastest-growing developing disability in the United States. No one really knows why the numbers are so high. Researchers have been pursuing all theories to varying degrees but science has not yet pointed to any concrete answers.

Today, most school-based programs rely on behavioral therapy to stimulate development. St. John's Lutheran wanted to be part of the learning process – both for students with autism and those without.

All students with autism at St. John's function well with one-on-one support, provided by their school district. Our partnership with Eden II has allowed us the opportunity to become aware of the similarities and differences of all children and stretch our level of tolerance.

Project implementation: We started this project with the inclusion of one student in second grade. Before the student ever entered the school, the associate director and the student's paraprofessional observed the teaching techniques of the teacher, met the students, develop a schedule and peruse the lay of the land. Final arrangements were made with the Principal and the project proceeded with the approval of the School Board. Several families at St. John's have children with autism. Parents appreciated the collaboration with Eden II and saw it as a chance – a glimmer of hope. Students with autism also need opportunities to learn and practice social skills in a natural environment. Encouraging interaction with peers is one area of focus.

Our first year was an education. Students accepted their "sometime" classmate assisting him as needed, showing him around and including him in play during recess. During this first year the principal/teacher visited Eden II and observed the education process of autistic children. Much planning and workshops were also attended as plans for the upcoming school year were discussed.

In the second year, our student with autism move with the class to third grade. The teacher he was assigned has dual certification in general and special education. Reading

was added to his schedule of specialty subjects and adjustments were made to accommodate him. All teachers at St. John's attended a professional development workshop on autism. Several visited Eden II and some attended outside workshops on the subject of autism. This year ran rather smoothly and Eden II proposed the possibility of securing more space for other students from their program.

Project during the Van Lunen Fellows Program: In this our third year, again the student moved on with the class to fourth grade. This move required more adjustments because St. John's math program was too advanced for our Eden II student. This gave us a great opportunity to map programs, and make assessments with the experts from Eden II, the teacher and principal from St. John's and the student's parents. Meetings were scheduled about every six weeks and progress was plotted.

During this year, 2008-2009, one full time inclusion student enrolled in fifth grade at St John's. He came from another religious school; bringing his provided paraprofessional with him. He has made a wonderful adjustment to this school. We also enrolled a three year old – from the Eden program – who attends preschool five mornings a week. He is assigned a SEIT teacher. The Preschool teacher, assistant, parents, SEIT and Principal meet to discuss the student's progress, needs, and program adjustments. After Christmas break, St. John's was asked to add two more Eden II students to our community. They both attend first grade, two half days a week, but come on different days.

Teachers at St. John's are continuously educating themselves through PD, articles, and videos to learn more about children with special needs.

The project's future: Our discussions all year focused on renting space to Eden II as a Resource Room for the school term 2009-2010. We have filed the necessary paperwork, reviewed the contract with our lawyers and insurance companies and have received a verbal agreement with the State Education Department. We are awaiting written confirmation, at which time; all parties will sign the contract.

Scheduled Professional Development on behavioral modification used by Eden II (ABA) is on the agenda before the opening of the new school year.

Randi Horowitz, Associate Executive Director of Eden II, Joann Mostovoy, Chairperson-Board of Christian Education at St. John's, and me, Principal of St. John's Lutheran, recently meet with our Congressmen to discuss our new project of an integrated preschool program. We are seeking capital improvement funding to add additional space to the school to house this program. This is only an initial step. Projected completion is 2011. There is a lot of work yet to be done.

It has been a privilege to partner with this school for autistic children, Eden II. They have taught us much, offering us lessons in hope, determination, compassion and friendship.

We foresee in the future a commitment to service other special needs groups.