



Innovations in Special Education for 2016: Technology, Music, Workplace Readiness and More

By Jeanette Rundquist

In one program, at Point Pleasant Borough High School, advanced software engineering students work with their special education peers to develop apps to meet their needs. In the process of developing things such as a school map tool and a supermarket shopping simulator, the two groups become friends.

In another program, at Irvington High School, special needs students learn workplace readiness skills. Through a website, a class, and by shadowing workers in industry, they learn what they need to succeed after high school.

Ten special education programs from schools across New Jersey were recognized during the 16th annual Innovations in Special Education Awards, presented during the state's annual Celebration of Special Education in May.

Using music, technology, books, and other teaching tools, in grades from preschool to high school, the programs were selected for making a difference for children with special education.

"The ten programs being honored today represent the high quality of special education programming in our state," said New Jersey School Boards Association president Don Webster Jr., who presented awards during the celebration held at the Princeton Marriott at Forrestal.

More than 150 students, teachers, parents, school board members and others were on hand for the awards ceremony and luncheon, which was organized by the NJSBA and ASAH, a non-profit that represents private special education schools.

Educators and students, who proudly displayed their programs, said being recognized was an honor. And along with collecting their accolades, many took the opportunity to network and share ideas during the celebration.

"It's almost like a think tank," said Denise Scairpon, of the Washington Township School District, in Morris County, whose school was honored for a program using reading, combining fifth-graders and preschoolers. "I got some ideas I want to try, moving forward, just by coming here."

The winning programs were among 48 nominated for the awards.

The programs selected as Innovation Award winners for 2016 are:

LLD student, on projects such as Halloween safety tips, or “What I Am Thankful For” at Thanksgiving. General education students help their special education peers learn public speaking and presentation skills, and both groups forge friendships and benefit from greater understanding of diversity. The program began with a small handful of students, and has grown as more and more students want to join in. For more information, contact Susan Cherney, supervisor of special and related services, at scherney@carteretschools.org (<mailto:scherney@carteretschools.org>).

P.G. Chambers School – Cedar Knolls

The ATEAM Approach: Assistive Technology-Linking Education, Access and Movement

An increasing amount of research documents a strong connection between movement, body position and learning in early childhood education. In this program, educators at P.G. Chambers School conducted a small study to determine the effects of body position on learning.

Over an eight-week period, multiply-disabled students took part in lessons while seated, standing and lying on the floor. Staff members recorded observations, and the results were significant: Students were better able to pay attention and participate in lessons in certain positions. Increases in attentiveness, and in motivation to learn, were reported. As a result, recommendations were developed for the optimal positions for learning, for the students. Annual re-assessments will be used to demonstrate student progress. For more information, contact, Andrea Quigley, director of development, at quigleya@chambersschool.org (<mailto:quigleya@chambersschool.org>).

Point Pleasant Borough High School – Point Pleasant

Panther Assisted Learning Software (PALS)

This program brings together multiply-disabled high school and transition students, with students in Point Pleasant Borough’s Advanced Software Engineering Topics class, to develop applications with assistive technologies that meet the disabled students’ varied educational needs.

Students in the software engineering classes work in professional project management teams to design and develop the applications. The true magic happens, though, when the engineering students meet and work with the transition class. Over several weeks, the two groups get to know one another, and the programmers understand the transition students’ needs. Applications that have been developed through PALS include a money-changing application; as well as PALS Find, a navigational tool that helps students find their way through the high school; and a supermarket shopping simulator. For more information, contact Rita Miller, supervisor of pupil personal services, at rmiller@pointpleasant.k12.nj.us (<mailto:rmiller@pointpleasant.k12.nj.us>).

The Matheny School – Peapack, NJ

Peace of Mind Preschool Program

It is challenging for medically-fragile children to take part in activities and therapies in school due to their unique limitations. This program addresses that problem by embedding a registered nurse full-time in the preschool program.

Having an RN as part of the classroom staff, who is also focused on helping with educational activities, allows children’s medical needs to be met, while providing an optimal learning environment. Parents are able to collaborate with the classroom nurse regarding their children’s changing medical needs. The community is able to volunteer in the classroom, and support the program and children. Staffing the program with an RN provides the children an unequaled level of safety and quality early childhood education. For more information, contact James Hintenach, supervisor of instruction, at jhintenach@matheny.org (<mailto:jhintenach@matheny.org>).