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Pathways Academy: a source of education and encouragement



A collage of student journalism hangs in the west wing corridor on the first floor of East House. The words converge around a photograph of a rocket.

"The students watched the Apollo 13 movie and wrote about it," said Laura Mead, principal of Pathways Academy, the year-round McLean school for students with autism spectrum disorders, such as Asperger's Syndrome. "These kids

struggle with journalism because it requires abstract thought. It's one of the many educational challenges they face."

Though it may be a daunting task, the writing demonstrates the focus and clarity these students can achieve if given a chance. Pathways Academy provides this opportunity, along with a hefty dose of encouragement and support.

The school is part of McLean's Center for Neurodevelopmental Services. The center and school provide integrated educational and therapeutic services to individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders.

"Pathways has been a godsend for our family. Our son is happy now and that's all we ever wanted for him." - A grateful parent

In many ways, Pathways is an ideal setting for students. "We have the resources and expertise to serve this population of children, especially those with co-occurring psychiatric conditions," said Roya Ostovar, PhD, director of both the school and center. "The clinical team works alongside the academic team to ensure the most comprehensive and effective treatment plan."

Typically, students with Asperger's Syndrome and similar conditions are mislabeled as "behaviorally problematic," said Ostovar. "Many of them have been bullied in their public schools."

According to Ostovar, schools don't always have the clinical and educational expertise to serve these students. Children can end up with academic problems, even though they have normal cognitive abilities.



East House: home to Pathways Academy.

"Unfortunately, there are few programs like ours in New England," said Ostovar. "We have had children come from areas outside of Route 495. The average bus ride to the school is one hour," added Mead.

In the future, school administrators hope to offer a residential program to serve students who live far away and those with significant psychiatric problems. They also want to expand the transition planning program and add vocational training for older students.

Pathways is approved by the Massachusetts Department of Education for children and young adults, ages 6 to 22. Though it is licensed for 32 students, its current enrollment is 28.

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Students begin their first class at 8:30 am. The school day consists of six 45-minute class periods with 15-minute sensory integration breaks between each class.

“During breaks, the kids might shoot basketballs, go for a walk around the campus or play a video game,” said Karen Steves, milieu manager. “They need this sort of sensory input throughout the day. It grounds them and it also helps them be more productive in the classroom. We also use items, such as weighted blankets, play dough, squeeze and fidget toys and other objects that provide added sensory stimulation.”

A recent grant, said Steves, enabled the school to build a gym, erect a basketball court and install several sandboxes to help students with sensory integration. The physical work eases tension and works off excess energy.

In the classroom, the school strives to dampen environmental stimuli and provide structure so as not to over excite students. For this reason, classes are small, up to a maximum of four students in each, and boast a low 1-to-2 staff-to-student ratio. The classrooms are kept spare and simple—a few desks and computers, a whiteboard and not much on the walls. Even lunch is kept short, only 15 minutes, so the students won’t get disorganized by having too much free time.

During the school day, students study math, science, language arts and social studies. They also attend the McLean Fitness Center. Last year, the school added a culinary arts program. “It really caught on. They love it,” said Mead. “They’re cooking, trying new foods, even helping out with meals at home.”

Each week, a professor and four undergraduates from the Berkley School of Music run a music therapy program. They bring keyboards, drums and other instruments. “It’s wonderful,” said Mead.

Pathways students also attend a class called “social pragmatics” where they learn everyday social skills. “People with Asperger’s Syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders misinterpret social cues—they have difficulty making eye contact, managing personal boundaries and keeping friendships,” said Steves. In class, students are taught routine social interaction, such as shaking hands and how close to stand to another person.

“Social pragmatics is often their least favorite class,” Steves noted. “The students are bright and gifted in so many ways, but they don’t see that they have this deficit. We teach it because they don’t learn it on their own.”

“When students arrive here, they finally like school. They make friends. They feel like they belong.” - Laura Mead, principal of Pathways Academy

One common gift the students share is a remarkable capacity to memorize information. A student might “list every battle in the Civil War,” said Steves, but not be able to explain the impact of the war. Learning to infer meaning from details poses a challenge. “We help them interpret the world at large,” she noted.



Pathways Academy opens up a new educational world to these students—one that is warm and welcoming. “When students arrive here, they finally like school. They make friends. They feel like they belong,” said Mead.

As one child’s mother recently reported: “Pathways has been a godsend for our family. Our son is happy now and that’s all we ever wanted for him.” ♦