Students with autism spectrum disorder can succeed in schools when principals set the standard for training, tolerance, and support. By Sheila Wagner

This fall in schools across the nation, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will experience educational opportunities that, until recently, were denied to them. Because the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensure that students with ASD are included in the student body, principals must make certain that they, too, progress and learn. However, because many principals have not had professional training in educating students with this complex disorder, the learning curve is sharp.

What Is Autism?

Autism is a severe disability that affects more than 700,000 students in the nation’s schools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention currently estimates that one in 110 children in the U.S. have ASD. Due to the complexities of the disorder, educating students with autism can be a confusing and complex process, stressing an individual classroom, school, and even an entire school system. It is a “spectrum” disorder, meaning that students can exhibit a range of profiles, from severe to mild. The autism spectrum includes autistic disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

ASD is a complex, neurologically based, developmental disability that becomes evident in the first three years of life. Although research has proved that early recognition, diagnosis, and intervention is optimal, a child might not actually receive...
the diagnosis until much later. It is not uncommon for students with milder ASD profiles to be diagnosed in middle school, high school, or even adulthood. Although parents are usually the first to recognize something is different about their child, sometimes teachers are the first to suspect a student has ASD due to differences they see between the student and his or her peers.

ASD characteristics include poor social skills, delayed language (onset and use), and the presence of intense interests and atypical and repetitive behaviors. Students with ASD might be verbal or nonverbal, might have cognitive abilities ranging from severe impairment to genius levels, might be passive or overly aggressive, or might prefer to be isolative or overly (and inappropriately) social. Consider the following profiles that describe a range of students on the autism spectrum.

Jonathan is a 5-year-old kindergarten student who has been diagnosed with autism. He speaks in single words or short phrases, and he often echoes rote phrases from his favorite cartoon, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which is inappropriate to the context. He does not play interactively with other children and he lacks the ability to engage in pretend play. Jonathan is not toilet trained and he can become very upset if changes occur in his daily schedule for which he is unprepared. However, Jonathan has a beautiful smile and can already recite the alphabet and numbers and is beginning to read.

Emily is a 10-year-old gifted student with Asperger’s syndrome who talks nonstop about her love of animals, especially horses. Emily knows scientific names for every horse species and she aced every test. She is eager to please, yet is overly passive. However, Emily doesn’t have any friends because she doesn’t pick up on her peers’ jokes and doesn’t engage in their play themes. Her peers recognize that she is different because her social overtures are over the top and odd. She is always alone at lunch and on the playground, though she desperately wants friends.

Michael, who is 15 and has been diagnosed with autism, is considered high-functioning, though he requires some modifications and visual supports in class. Michael has a paraprofessional to assist him with staying on-task and in his seat and to redirect his repetitive, self-stimulatory behaviors. Michael will blurt out in class, make inappropriate statements or actions (picking his nose, playing with tiny pieces of paper) and can interfere with the lesson when he disagrees with the teacher. Michael understands much of the academic content, though he struggles with higher order abstract concepts.

As these examples illustrate, ASD characteristics vary widely, which can pose significant challenges for schools. Inappropriate behaviors that can interfere with learning include repetitive speech, poor eye contact, inappropriate laughing or crying, hand-flapping, twirling, difficulty with sharing and taking turns, frequent out-of-seat behavior, poor social relatedness, lack of response to name, short attention span, and difficulty with transitions, leading to outbursts. But students with ASD also exhibit a number of desirable behaviors and characteristics, including phenomenal rote memory, perseverance, truthfulness and innocence, an eagerness to comply with rules, creativity, and an ability to learn.

As stated in the National Research Council’s *Educating Children with Autism*, early intervention is critical to improving behaviors and promoting the long-term progress of a child with autism. Early intervention through systematic, intensive intervention practices and positive role models results in a better chance that the student will stay aligned to his or her peers’ behaviors. But early intervention requires informed and trained principals and teachers. If ASD is suspected in a student, principals should work closely with teachers and counselors in the referral process to gain eligibility for services as quickly as possible.

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**Principal ONLINE**

Access the following web resources by visiting Principal magazine online: [www.naesp.org/SeptOct11](http://www.naesp.org/SeptOct11)

In the Principal article “Open Doors for Autism,” the author provides guidance on how to help students with ASD transition from elementary to middle school.

The Autism Speaks website provides a listing of family services, including information for parents about diagnosis and early intervention.

Books, videos, and conferences, including books by this article’s author, are available on the Future Horizons website, which aims to meet the needs of teachers, therapists, and family members who face the challenge of autism.
environment (i.e., the general education classroom). In addition to promoting access to the core curriculum, best practice for educating students with ASD includes providing positive role models so that students can gain experiences that can be used for a lifetime.

Teachers who are not trained in educating students with ASD face frustration and confusion and, thus, turn to the principal for guidance and support. However, many principals are unprepared to lead learning for students with ASD and must be brought up to speed quickly. Here are the fundamental components to effectively educating students with this disorder.

**Staff Development.** Teaching staff need to understand ASD and how individuals with ASD process information, which is quite different from their typical peers. In-depth training in all of the various profiles of ASD and strategies to teach them is necessary for those directly teaching the student. In addition, the entire school staff should undergo awareness training.

**Consistency in Staffing.** Students with ASD learn best with predictability in staffing, schedules, and events, but do not thrive if teaching staff change quickly. Too often, this is the largest cause for disruptive behaviors. Visual schedules, task lists, and rehearsal strategies can help to lessen distress if changes must occur. Students will also need the appropriate supports identified in the individualized education plan (para-professional time, behavior plans, visual supports, academic modifications, etc.), which must be implemented consistently throughout the day and school term.

**Information.** School staff will quickly learn that ASD students are different and that they need information about the disorder to help prevent negative opinions. In addition, schools should be prepared to offer parents information and resources as well. Last, all students need disability awareness to increase their understanding and tolerance of all disabilities, including ASD.

**Positive Behavior Supports.** Inappropriate behaviors go hand in hand with ASD, so expect them to occur. However, the emphasis should be on behavior modification, not management, and the ability and compliance of all staff to carry out the plan effectively and consistently across the entire school day. School staff must not assume that ASD students know the correct behaviors to exhibit; these students must be taught routines that typical children pick up readily such as waiting their turn, walking in lines, and raising their hand. Children learn to exhibit acceptable behaviors when they are praised. Praise reinforces these standard behaviors, helping children to learn to exhibit them rather than the inappropriate behaviors.

**Social Skills Training.** Placing students with ASD in general education classes is not sufficient to teach them social skills—it is only the first step. Students with ASD need both daily and weekly direct instruction in social skills and incidental carry-over into the classrooms to learn to pick up and respond to social, and environmental cues. Teachers will need to collaborate to promote carry-over.

**Schoolwide Anti-bullying Curriculum.** Students with ASD are extremely vulnerable to being bullied due to their lack of social skills and immaturity. ASD students rarely lie, so if they say they are being bullied, they most likely are. Train all students in tolerance; provide examples of what a student should do if they witness bullying behavior or if they themselves are being bullied; and train teachers to recognize the various forms of bullying. In addition, provide extra training to ASD students, targeting the social skills that put them at risk of being bullied.

**Transition Planning.** A crucial component each year, transition planning is especially important when students move on to middle school. Middle schools are often larger, more crowded, and noisier environments, which can be frightening and confusing for students with ASD. Students require preparations such as participating in site visits, reading stories about the change, looking at images of the new building and staff, and being reassured that they will be secure. Many ASD students are not ready to fulfill the expectations for higher-level independence and will require ongoing support from teaching staff.

**Ongoing Collaboration With Parents.** Parents are sometimes distrustful of principals and teachers, causing a tentative relationship. However, trust can be built through routine, periodic collaboration meetings to discuss current issues and fine-tune programming.

**Ongoing Collaboration Between Teachers.** General education—and often special education—teachers typically do not receive training sufficient to solve all the issues posed by students with ASD. General and special education staff need time in their schedules to meet on a regular basis to share strategies. Close coordination can go a long way toward preventing disruptions, confusion, and intolerance.

**Principal Leadership.** Principals must understand ASD in order to manage discipline. Students with ASD have a “one-perspective approach” to the world and often do not understand how they violate social and school norms and rules. Sometimes typical ASD behaviors will breach zero-tolerance rules and suspension is on the table. If possible, principals should not suspend students with ASD for inappropriate behaviors since they almost never learn the lesson intended and the behaviors usually increase. Instead, examine other alternatives for consequences.

**Set the Standard**

Students with ASD can succeed in schools when principals set the standard for training, tolerance, and support. Because teachers and staff take their cues from the principal, everyone benefits when principals set the stage for acceptance, are well versed in ASD, and have a firm belief that ASD students can learn. Though students with ASD might pose some difficulties, their outcomes depend on you and the standards that you set for your school.

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