

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Initiative uses training network to help students with autism

By Madelynn Coldiron
Staff Writer

Kentucky's students with autism will benefit from cutting-edge classroom strategies as the state begins rolling out a new training system for teachers and other school personnel.

Kentucky is one of three states chosen by national autism experts to put into practice the research-based techniques and instructional strategies proven to work with children with autism and other developmental disabilities. Those strategies will filter down to the classroom level – both regular and special education – via regional training networks.

The need is pressing. The number of Kentucky children identified by the state education department with autism spectrum disorders has risen to 3,535 at last count, up from 1,032 in 2000, mirroring a national trend. Using the federal incidence rate, the number of Kentucky children with ASD is much higher – at 9,164. Autism spectrum disorders are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges.

Laura McCullough, a program consultant with the state education department's Division of Exceptional Children Services, said schools "have a challenge on our hands. And in many ways we're not up to date about the characteristics, needs and interventions for this population spectrum.

"We are becoming more and more aware that these students are going to require that everybody in schools have at least a basic understanding of their characteristics, needs and interventions."

The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, which selected Kentucky for the project, has provided the state with basic training and proven resources for helping students with ASD. The Kentucky Autism Training Center at the University of Louisville has adapted that information and partnered with Kentucky Department of Education to provide training for the state's 11 regional special education cooperatives. The co-ops, in turn, currently are training cadres made up of teachers – some special education and some not – and others from school districts. They will take the lessons learned back to their districts and plan training for other educators.

Finally, model classroom sites will be established in each region over the next four years, where teachers can see the strategies in use. Special education regional co-ops will continue to be a resource during that time, and McCullough said districts will be encouraged to form problem-solving teams to serve their schools.

"Our goal is to build local capacity within all schools to support students with autism," said Rob Pennington, assistant director of training for the Kentucky Autism Training Center. "With appropriate supports and instruction techniques, students with autism can learn and lead more independent lives."

Most teachers don't have training in this area, said Kathy Meredith, complex needs consultant for the Ashland-based Big East Special Education Cooperative.

"The benefits of providing each district with the knowledge necessary to teach our students with autism spectrum disorder will benefit every child," she said.

Training shows promise

Meredith said the training of her region's 60-member cadre has gone "amazingly well."

Among the cadre members in that region are representatives of early childhood education groups, including First Steps, Early Childhood Regional Training Centers and a private preschool/early childhood program.

"We're also trying to select a key parent in each school dis-



“We have students who have important needs and these kids are capable of becoming not only productive, but some of them brilliant contributors to the good of society, if they are given the kind of educational support that they need to be able to realize their potential. However, without some support and education and intervention, many of these students are joining this group that are not productive and require adult care for the rest of their lives to the tune of \$3.2 million per child.”

— Laura McCullough, Kentucky Department of Education

trict so that they can be an advocate in that area and get information to parents if need be,” Meredith said.

At the local level, the initiative has started off strong in Lewis County, even before widespread training of district teachers, said Lori O’Keefe, the school district’s behavior interventionist who is part of the regional cadre in her area.

“Initially when we first went in we just wanted to raise awareness and we wanted people to understand that autism affects everyone in some way,” she said.

With that in mind, the county’s first Autism Awareness Walk was organized – 50 people were expected to participate, but 300 turned out, O’Keefe said.

“I heard lots of talk around the community about the walk,” Lewis County school board member Robert Kennard said.

O’Keefe also has launched a peer mentoring group to pair students with autism spectrum disorders with a classmate.

“Our youth have really been phenomenal,” she said.

While full-scale teacher training has not begun in Lewis or most other districts, O’Keefe said some teachers who anticipate having children with ASD in their classroom asked her for help.

Teachers say they’ve long needed this training and have been receptive, she said – and parents agree.

“I think the biggest thing I have found is the parents are so pleased that people are going outside their box and trying. We offer help to them, too, and we want to give them some strategies as well,” O’Keefe said.

Angela Aebersold, whose son, Alec, is an eighth-grader at one of the ASD model sites in Jefferson County, praised the setup and structure of the program, and its effect on her son.

“It’s the first time he’s actually been able to learn,” she said. “I guess all the information was going in, but it wasn’t coming out until

he got in the model program. For the first time, he’s made A-B honor roll.”

Training in ASD strategies is important for teachers, especially behavioral training, she said. ☼

Puzzle pieces

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that an average of one in 110 children in the U.S. has an autism spectrum disorder, though another recent study puts it at one in 100.

- ASDs are “spectrum disorders.” That means ASDs affect each person in different ways, ranging from very mild to severe. People with ASDs share some similar symptoms, but there are differences in when the symptoms start, how severe they are, and the exact nature of the symptoms

- Individuals with an ASD had average medical expenditures that exceeded those without an ASD by \$4,110–\$6,200 per year. On average, medical expenditures for individuals with an ASD were 4.1–6.2 times greater than for those without an ASD.

Source: The CDC website



Photo provided by Lewis County Schools

Lewis County students took part in the community’s first-ever Autism Awareness Walk April 10. A group of kindergartners even walked in honor of one of their peers.