

Autism and the Warwick Valley Central School District
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When I first arrived in Warwick I was approached by many individuals with concerns and issues they wanted me to look into. Meetings with booster club leadership in the areas of school and youth sports took place, but other individuals came forward also. The Superintendent of Greenwood Lake approached me regarding the tuitioning of his students to Warwick. Two parents came forward and left an unforgettable impression on me as their situations did not seem logical in my own mind. These women were mothers of children with autism within our district. While I was familiar with autism, it was their tale of out-of-county placement, long bus rides on a daily basis and the lack of what many consider an ideal program for their children in Orange County that struck home with me.

From that day on, I attempted to see what might be done to address their concerns and the concerns of many other families impacted by autism. I approached BOCES to see how we might implement programs here that these mothers currently have to go to Ulster and Rockland counties to find. I found out that one of the main hindrances to developing such programs is classroom space in Orange County. I accepted a role on an Autism Task Force put together by Assemblywoman Rabbitt to seek answers to the growing concerns of parents with children having autism, hoping that this group might come up with a solution. Unfortunately, any efforts fell short of the needs of these parents and the families who have children with autism.

Autism has received a lot of attention recently in the media; but for those who are unfamiliar with the disorder, let me give a brief overview. Autism is a spectrum disorder defined by a certain set of behaviors. Those with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviors in any degree of severity. These behaviors/traits include insistence on sameness, resistance to change, difficulty in expressing needs, repeating words or phrases in place of normal responsive language, laughing (or crying) for no apparent reason,

tantrum, preference to being alone and aloof manner. People with autism also process and respond to information in unique ways.

The force that continues to drive my involvement in seeking a solution for children with autism in Warwick and Orange County as a whole was how I would feel having my own children travel up to 1½ hours each way to get to a program for their special needs. My thought process, I admit, may be a little "out of the box" of the conventional administrator, but I always tend to look at situations and ask why not.

During the demographic review of data for the Greenwood Lake Tuitioning, I came to see that Warwick, because of its demographics, would have space over time in the elementary schools that is not currently available; and while the Greenwood Lake Tuitioning might address falling enrollment at the secondary level, it would not impact on the elementary level. The Orange-Ulster BOCES was approached to see if there was interest in an expansion of program beyond the currently rented space in Sanfordville, While they seemed interested, I kept coming back to the point that even though we might lease space for a program within Warwick, there is no guarantee our own district children would be able to attend the program. This is because a BOCES program must be shared services from all the component school districts. Thus, with no guarantee of placements for Warwick students within the confines of this program, a different approach of housing our own program began to evolve. There were/are, however, numerous potential obstacles to overcome.

Enter the same two women again who are part of an Orange County Autism Support Group. They invited key educational and legislative leaders to a presentation on the needs of autistic students and a special program not readily available in Orange County known as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). The statistics shared (One in every 150 children has a form of autism. While the U.S. population has increased at a rate of 13%, autism was increasing at a rate of 172% during the 1990s) were staggering; and while those hosting the presentation had children with autism, they demonstrated true concerns not only for their own kids but also for future families and children. The

presentation itself cemented my own feelings that we needed to develop an ABA program in Warwick/Orange County in order to, at the very least, provide these services to our own students in Warwick.

A review of the cost of sending students to programs outside of the district showed that such attendance could/would be \$135,000 or more for program and transportation. Discussions began in earnest of potentially hosting a program within Warwick. After all, we have the students; transporting 1½ hours each way to an educational program seems illogical for any student, no less a student with special needs; we have space opening up for such a program, and it could save the residents tax dollars. Pieces of the puzzle eventually began falling in place. A major missing piece, however, seemed to be where to receive training for staff and parents (which is expensive and usually offered at inconvenient times and locations for staff/parents).

There is a promising Pilot Program whose purpose is to help empower local school districts to build capacity in training professionals to work with children with autism in public school settings. The group developing the Pilot Program is known as FATE (Foundation for Autism Teacher Education) headed by Thomas Caffrey (who incidentally was the speaker at the workshop presentation in Orange County last year). With the potential to have local training in place, the puzzle seemed to truly be coming together to possibly begin a program during the 2009-2010 school year. Why so far off? Well, there is planning to do, information to be gathered and disseminated, budget preparation and interviewing/hiring among other things. The conceptual plan at this point in time is to start with an early elementary grade and gradually expand the program over a period of time, one grade at a time, making sure that the home school environment – or students and their families – is not overwhelmed.

Even though the target date is more than 1½ years off, an event will take place in Warwick on April 5th, co-sponsored by the N.Y. Autism Resource Center, Inc. and the Warwick Valley Central School District. The program, called "Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis and Teaching Verbal Behavior in the Classroom," will run from 9 a.m.

to 5 p.m. This introductory workshop will demonstrate how the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) that emphasize the teaching of verbal behavior are being applied effectively in public schools to teach children with autism language, academics and other important skills. The workshop is open to parents, the public, families with children having autism, special education and regular education teachers and other educators, as well as those entering the field of education. Registration is available online at: www.thefate.org

While the workshop is just one small step in the process of involving the Warwick community in the issue of autism, it marks the beginning of a phase-in process for the Warwick Valley Central School District – one that hopefully will continue to germinate until a program can be put into place for students with autism, so that they no longer have to travel extended distances for necessary programs.