Divison Highlights

Autism Spectrum Disorder
Initiatives in Franklin County Public Schools

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Franklin County Virginia is located at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and spans a little over 710 square miles. It is the home of:

- 12 elementary schools
- 1 middle school
- 1 middle school technological school
- 1 high school
- 1 adult education center.

Franklin County was chosen to be part of the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) Technical Assistance Cohort 2. They were one of six divisions chosen for this cohort through a competitive application process. This collaboration between Franklin County Public Schools and VCU-ACE began in 2014 and focuses on working on systems change to improve services and supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). As part of the collaboration with VCU-ACE, Franklin County created a team of professionals to work on the goals set forth by the division.

Franklin County is excited to report they have made tremendous gains in educating students with ASD across ages and grades. Specifically, at the high school, the team has developed an elective course for students to address social skills, life skills, and career-readiness skills. This course is not just for students with ASD, but rather for any student who may need a little extra support in one or more of these areas. Through this course, students participate in project-based activities to generalize the skills they learn. One activity the students participated in was to develop skits about middle school that they then shared with upper elementary and middle school students to provide these upcoming students with “things to remember” when going to middle school.

At the middle school, an after school social skills group has been developed to address similar skills. Students have an opportunity to learn and practice a variety of skills from the PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills) (Laugeson, 2014) program including, appropriate conversational skills, appropriate humor, how to talk on the phone, being a good sport, handling disagreements, rejection, teasing, and bullying.

Across the division, administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals are working hard to expand their knowledge in an effort to become an “All Kids Accepted Academy”. The division is committed to furthering the knowledge of all people who interact with students with ASD. The goal is to have eighty percent of staff at all schools complete a three course series, participate in a professional learning opportunity, and implement a peer (student) acceptance program. The goal is to provide an accepting and nurturing environment for all students... including those with ASD. The plan for schools to become All Kids Accepted Academy Schools is the first step to be a “NEST- Ready” school.

Finally, Franklin County has implemented the first NEST classroom outside of New York City! The Burnt Chimney Elementary School has a 3rd grade NEST classroom. This classroom is organized to provide structure, support, and services that students with ASD require and which are beneficial for all students, including those without ASD. The class is co-taught by a team of general and special education teachers. The growth in all of the students in this classroom is impressive and the Burnt Chimney Team has implemented this model and developed supports that the rest of the division can look toward when starting future NEST classrooms.

Franklin County Public Schools have experienced many successes since the start of Cohort 2 and the collaboration with VCU-ACE. The division has implemented some innovative and effective models to increase staff knowledge and skills in the area of ASD and improved services and supports to their students with ASD.