

Autism Information Fast Facts

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Autism Center for Excellence

January 2017

Project PASS

Preparing for Academic and Social Success

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Educating young learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and complex learning needs can be incredibly rewarding but may also be challenging. These young learners often require specific strategies and supports in order to reach their potential. School teams also require specific knowledge and skills to increase their ability to provide such interventions. Project PASS, or Preparing for Academic and Social Success, is a comprehensive program designed by Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) specifically for children with ASD and developmental delay who are in an Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) classroom. Through a step-by-step training and implementation process, Project PASS addresses the educational needs of children with ASD and significant learning challenges, builds critical foundational skills required for independence, and fosters a successful transition to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This multicomponent but cost effective professional development model incorporates evidence-based practices such as antecedent-based interventions, visual supports, systematic instruction, reinforcement, and social communication intervention. Further, best practices in implementation science are utilized to facilitate systems change and sustainability.



► What are the components of Project PASS?

Project PASS is an organized comprehensive professional development package that allows educators to learn intervention practices and emphasizes the importance of individualization based on student needs and abilities. These activities consist of:

- Classroom and student-based assessments
- Goal development for teachers and students
- Online activities for educators facilitated by a VCU-ACE staff member
- Self-paced online course for parents and caregivers
- Administrative support
- Live professional development
- In-classroom coaching
- Guidance documents and tools



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► Classroom and Student-Based Assessments

Prior to any intervention, three assessments are used to gather data on target students as well as teacher instruction and the classroom environment. Specifically, the Autism Program Environmental Rating Scale (APERS) (NPDC, 2013) provides an overview of the classroom and instruction focusing on the domains of learning environment, positive learning climate, assessment and IEP development, curriculum and instruction, communication, social competence, personal independence and competence, functional behavior, family involvement, and teaming. Additionally, specific student measures of the Verbal Behavior Milestones and Placement Program (VB-MAPP) (Sundberg, 2008) and the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Infants and Children (AEPS) (Bricker, et al., 2002) are used to determine changes in student skills. Together, these assessments provide information about students in the areas of verbal behavior and communication skills, social skills, play skills, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive skills, adaptive skills, and academic skills in the areas of reading, math, and writing. These three assessments form the basis of planning for educational teams in Project PASS.

► Goal Development

Results from these assessments lead to goal development for educators. The teachers and embedded coach hold individual coaching sessions to discuss the results of their individual APERS and target student assessments in order to determine appropriate long-term goals in areas of critical foundational skills. Teams also review the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) of target students to ensure goals and objectives focus on desired student outcomes.

► Online Activities for Educators

The online activity component of Project PASS consists of five modules aligned with the strategies and principles used in guidance documents. These activities were designed by VCU-ACE and are facilitated by a VCU-ACE staff member. The modules are organized in an online dashboard system designed to enhance learning and implementation. The MyACE Dashboard is a new way to provide a customizable training experience and allows participants to view material, take quizzes, and earn badges for different topics or modules. Participants are required to pass a quiz and must receive all five badges in order to complete this component. The activities take approximately 20 hours over the course of the school year to complete.



► Online Course for Parents

The Parent Playbook is a course designed to introduce families to information about Autism Spectrum Disorder, including tips specifically for caregivers, information about the DSM-5, characteristics, interventions, and recommended programs and services. This course is also helpful for children with developmental delay. While some information is specifically about ASD, there are many strategies, tips, and services that are beneficial to all parents and caregivers. During this

course, parents and caregivers receive a parent handbook, parent checklist, resource document, and a vocabulary document. This course was designed for parents who have children participating in Project PASS as well as those who don't and is useful for all parents who have a child with ASD.

► Administrative Support

Implementation science suggests that a bi-directional approach is crucial for success of any program. In other words, systems change must come from the top down and the bottom up at the same time. While teachers and support staff must deliver evidence-based practices on an individualized basis in the classroom, they are not the only critical piece of systems change. Administrators play a key role in these efforts! Administrators must have knowledge of the specialized strategies and supports needed to help students with ASD as well as be able to determine professional development needs and teacher competency. Specific to Project PASS, building administrators are asked to complete the VCU-ACE developed Performance Standards and Evaluation Criteria for Special Educators tool. They do this twice per year. This allows administrators to be more hands on and have better knowledge of these preschool classrooms. The tool also provides a lot of information and VCU-ACE provides on-demand training on the topics included in the tool.



► Live Professional Development

During live professional development sessions, a VCU-ACE staff member utilizes a training manual to direct activities. Participants are provided with their own handbook that leads the team through the step-by-step process of completing activities from the online system, identifying short-term personal goals, guiding discussion and problem-solving sessions, and implementing new skills in the classroom. Training and discussion in these sessions takes place in a systematic manner in order to further knowledge of various elements of the program and support the transfer of knowledge to implementation in the classroom.

► Weekly Coaching Sessions

Teachers also receive live classroom observations and weekly coaching sessions from an embedded VCU-ACE coach. Observations are in the classroom where the embedded coach is able to model strategies and techniques learned through the online activities and live professional development sessions and allow teachers to demonstrate these skills as well. During the coaching sessions, participants set and review their goals for targeted students, review student data, and receive feedback on implementation performance.



► Guidance Documents

Guidance documents include a sequential planning document called the PASSport for Educators, an associated matrix designed to prompt planning for students, as well as a companion PASSport for Parents document. The PASSport was developed using information from both the Skill Competencies for Professional and Paraprofessionals in Virginia Supporting Individuals with Autism Across the Lifespan (Virginia Autism Council, 2010) and the domains under the APERS (NPDC, 2013). The PASSport contains seven domains including student goals, learning environment, activities, daily schedule, instructional design, teaching format, and instructional strategies. Each element also includes considerations to promote teaming. The accompanying matrix provides a template for planning based on the PASSport in order to incorporate essential programming elements within the early childhood special education setting. Specifically, the matrix prompts teachers to consider the sections of the PASSport in their planning of daily activities in the classroom including.

The PASSport for Parents checklist helps parents consider their own needs, their child's needs, activities, schedules, and includes information to discuss with the educational team to assist with generalization of skills. This document is aligned with the PASSport that the educational team is using to help promote teaming between the educational team and families. ●●●●●●●●●●

► Project PASS Results

Results from the first two years of Project PASS are extremely encouraging. The model appears to improve teacher instruction and results in improved student outcomes. All teachers and all students who participated improved their scores on all three assessment measures. Additionally, teachers informally reported increased feelings of satisfaction with their jobs, increased confidence in their performance and abilities, and a desire to continue implementing what they had learned. The data suggest Project PASS has promise of being a solid and viable model for public school divisions to implement in order to improve preschool instruction and student performance in a manner that is effective, efficient, and affordable!

Project PASS continues to be implemented and is expanding into additional divisions. Steps to further expand the project are being explored. For more information on this initiative, please visit the VCU-ACE website:

<https://vcuautismcenter.org/about/projects/projectpass.cfm> ●●●●●●●●●●



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Information for this "Autism Fast Facts" is from Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE), which is funded by the Virginia State Department of Education (Grant # 881-61172-H027A150107).

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