At one Staten Island middle school autistic students are speaking out for themselves

Paulo Intermediate School students in the NEST program for students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, performed a play during the school's first Autism Awareness Night. (Jessica Jackson)

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The transition into intermediate school is not an easy one for any student, but when the student is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the transition may be even more difficult.

Fortunately the Nest Program at Paulo Intermediate School, Huguenot, exists to help ASD students make a smooth transition into adolescence and the upper grades.

The program helps nurture ASD students so that they can feel at home in their school environment, "enabling higher-functioning students with ASD to have "the structure, support and services needed so that they can be successful in an inclusive setting in school and within their community," explained Jessica Jackson, assistant principal for special education at Paulo.

"Students in the program learn skills necessary to function socially, academically and behaviorally," she said.

The Nest Program at Paulo was created three years ago, and since then teachers, staff and administrators have been encouraged by students' progress.

"We started this program three years ago, and it's been amazing to me to watch how far these students have come," Ms. Jackson said.
"Many have learned to better accept who they are and become advocates for themselves, and the disorder, so that people know they are not defined by their disorder," she said.

As an example of how far students have come, Paulo recently hosted its first "Autism Awareness Night" during which ASD students in the Nest Program literally took center stage to speak for themselves.

Students got on stage to read stories and poems out loud about how to cope with ASD. The kids sang songs about acceptance, and some wore t-shirts they designed, with a symbolic butterfly coming out of its cocoon, and the quote: "If nothing ever changed, there would be no butterflies."

The program also included a performance of the play "Pumpkin Soup" that ASD students presented. Students worked after school, with Nest coach Jonelle Marenda, and speech therapist Jaime Scalfani, to rehearse the play about teaching others how to accept autism in their family.

"Students who participated had many reasons for doing so," Ms. Jackson said. "They were unhappy with the stereotype that many still hold, that people with ASD are uncommunicative and unaware of the world around them. They wanted others to know that they do indeed know they have difficulty with some things, but they can overcome those difficulties with support from adults and peers."

The play was written by Paulo Nest student Christopher Delgado and his mom, Holly Pepe.

"We wanted to show that people who have ASD are not disabled; we just see the world differently," Christopher explained.

His ASD classmates agreed.

"When you have ASD you are misunderstood by family and peers. We wanted to show how we are all different, but it's okay to be that way," said eighth-grader Kyle Gravitch.

"If you have ASD you should still be proud of who you are," added Michael Ingrassia, an eighth-grader. "People are individuals, and have their own interests, and that is what makes us human."

Ms. Jackson said she is proud of Paulo's ASD Nest students.

"These students are our best teachers," she said. "The way they are advocating for themselves is a message to us all to stand up and listen."

By Diane C. Lore/Staten Island Advance
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