

SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT BOARD REPORT FEBRUARY 2014

HELPING STUDENTS TO STAY FOCUSED (AND INCREASE LEARNING)

Children with autism and other special needs often benefit from sensory input to help them to stay focused on learning. There are many ways to provide this input. What works best varies by student. The goal with sensory input is always to increase the child's ability to focus on instruction without distracting the other students. A variety of sensory input techniques are used at Unity. A few are described below:

Fidgets: A fidget is anything that a student can hold and move around in their hand while still paying attention to a lesson. Some of the items that we use are squishy balls, koosh balls, pencil top fidgets, and cloth fidgets. Cheryl Volgren, an educational assistant, made and donated cloth fidgets patterned after one that had been purchased to use in the elementary CD classroom.



Squishy Ball



Koosh Ball



Pencil top fidget



Cloth fidget (filled w/rice)

Some students are better able to attend if they are provided with pressure on their bodies. This can be accomplished by pressing down on their shoulders or their heads. During a lesson, weighted vests, blankets or other objects can be used to apply pressure. Weighted vests usually have pockets to put the weights in, so the weight can be adjusted to meet the students' needs. Deb Dunsmoor, an educational assistant, made weighted vests for use in the elementary CD room patterned after purchased vests.



weighted vest



weighted blanket



weighted snake

Some students have high oral motor sensory needs. Depending on the student's age and/or

developmental level, oral motor sensory needs are addressed with specific items designed to provide the student with input to increase their ability to focus on information other than their oral needs. Some common choices utilized at our school are shown below:



Chewy tubes



“Netties” filled with ice or frozen fruit



Tubing

Middle School SGD/PLC Grant

The middle school received a five year grant to improve the reading outcomes of students with disabilities using the PLC framework. The members of the team plan to put together a presentation for the school board later in the year, below some basic information is given:

- PLC stands for Professional Learning Community.
- The PLC includes an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve.
- The team evaluates student learning and not their own teaching.
- The PLC operates under the belief that all students can learn.
- The team currently has been looking at and collecting data.
- The team is doing research to improve special education student reading scores. Some research includes possibly visiting schools who are implementing innovative and promising practices. They are also doing surveys on the current curriculum.

High School Social Skills

The high school special education classrooms adopted a new research-based social skills curriculum called *School-Connect: Optimizing the High School Experience*.

As stated on the School-Connect website, “School-Connect seeks to foster academic engagement, enhance social and emotional competencies, reduce risk behaviors, and facilitate supportive relationships within high school communities. The ultimate goal is to prepare adolescents for adulthood both personally and professionally.”

School-Connect focuses on the five social and emotional competency areas identified by the

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as critical to young people's success in school, the workplace, and life in general. The five areas are:

1. **Social awareness**—Showing understanding and empathy for others
2. **Self-awareness**— Recognizing one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and limitations
3. **Self-management**—Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals
4. **Relationship skills**—Forming positive relationships, working in teams, dealing effectively with conflicts
5. **Responsible decision making**—Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior

The students at Unity High have learned a great deal from this new curriculum in just a short time of implementation. Students with emotional behavioral disabilities have learned to use their rational mind to develop alternative thoughts to situations where their automatic thoughts create negative feelings. Students with autism have learned how to determine others feelings by reading body language, and how to show empathy towards others. The curriculum also has a bullying component which emphasizes what is and is not bullying. This component reiterates and builds on what students learned in middle school, and solidifies how to deal with bullying issues.

Unity staff is looking forward to continuing this curriculum throughout the rest of the school year and can't wait to see all of the positive skills our students will develop in class and as a result apply them in their everyday lives.