

# EDUCATION UPDATE

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## IMAGINE ACADEMY COMMITS TO FUTURE OF AUTISM

By MCCARTON ACKERMAN

At a time when the demand for autism education is at a record high, one Brooklyn school is not only striving to meet those needs, but preparing to face an even greater demand in the future.

The Imagine Academy was created in 2004 to help children and their families who have Autism Spectrum Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, and Asperger's syndrome. The academy was put together by parents of affected children who were frustrated by the limited resources and opportunities available for special-needs children. The school is currently at full capacity with 15 students and 30 staff members and offers a full day of integrated therapies.

"Over the last five years, we've worked hard to create a structure that builds well with the philosophy of the school so it breeds a culture of advancement," said Mindy Jerome, executive director of Imagine Academy.

Each child at the school has his or her own customized program that includes a variety of proven methodologies, including applied behavior analysis, DIR-Floortime, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Students also participate in group sessions so that they have the chance to interact with their peers.

Elisa Chrem, principal of Imagine Academy, said that the interdisciplinary approach that the school has adopted is what makes it stand out amongst other special-needs programs. All staff members are given training in ABA and DIR methodologies as part of their commitment to fostering the school's philosophy.

"You can't focus on only one area and be effective," said Chrem. "There have historically been separate schools for these two programs, so it's remarkable that the clinicians who worked with us on creating these programs were able to mesh. It makes sense to everyone now that we're living with it and seeing the improvements our students have made."

Imagine Academy also has encouraged the recruitment of trained autism professionals and community involvement. Tuesday afternoons are spent talking with professionals in the area about the projects that the school is currently working on. Several New York City students are also taking semester- or year-long internships at the school for college credit. The school also has a mentorship program in which a group of boys similar in age will visit the school every other week and participate in activities with the students.

This has resulted in every child at Imagine making marked progress. Some children are able to spend part of their educational experience in



a traditional school setting with the aid of a supervisor. Another child is now beginning to use words for the first time at the age of 8.

"It's important for us to spread the gospel of this," said Jerome. "We have evolved so much as a school and program, and our vision has grown based upon the needs of the families."

Over the last five years, the school has adopted an extended day program so that students have structured activities for a longer period of time. Local organizations, including the Sephardic Community Center, are supporting the program by offering the use of their facilities.

"When our son was 5, a full day of school was sufficient," said Heather Deutsch, a parent and board member. Now, at the age of 10, there is still a full day in front of us. He needs more structure because he isn't able to do the same things that his sisters are able to."

Jerome said the academy will be moving to a new and larger facility next year in a nearby area. A 24-hour residency will be created in one wing of the school within two years, while an autism resource center will be created in the other wing within three to four years. Most importantly, the school is committed to the education of their students for life.

"When this population moves to residency, there tends to be a regression in skills," said Jerome. "They've gone from getting help five days a week to almost nothing, which is something we intend to change. Our residency program will still involve the continuing of their education."#