April is Autism Awareness Month

Although the term Autism has been in use since the early 1900’s to describe a range of neuro-psychological conditions, it wasn’t until 1990 that it was recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as one of the 13 categories under which students can receive special education. “Autism Spectrum Disorders” is an umbrella term now used to categorize what used to be four separate disorders: autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder. There is a saying in the autism community: “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” Of course, the meaning behind this statement is that the disability manifests itself in many different ways. There are, however, some hallmark characteristics that can be used in a general way to describe autism. People who have autism are said to have disruptions in their ability to effectively engage in verbal and non-verbal communication. The individual frequently has difficulty processing sensory information and can be resistant to change in daily routines.

However the disability manifests in an individual, it is important for our educational teams to understand how those characteristics can affect a child’s education. Fargo Public Schools (FPS) has been committed to creating a continuum of supports and building staff knowledge in this area through our Asperger’s Program Facilitator. This position got its start in the District in 2010 and was originally known as the Asperger’s Teacher Coach. The position has transformed significantly since its inception, and Silvia DeKrey, our current facilitator, continues to expand on the use of her services. This has allowed the FPS educational teams to more effectively identify individuals who may have Asperger’s, offer programming and support ideas to our teaching teams, and also create a collaborative effort among teachers, families, and outside agencies to best support our students. The result is better learning opportunities for our students.

In celebration of Autism Awareness Month, meet FPS Asperger’s Program Facilitator Silvia DeKrey, and learn how she assists our staff and students to live out the mission of the FPS Student Support Services to assist all students in the development of self-reliance, communication, and life skills to foster the greatest possible degree of independent living.

My job is really to act as a detective. I observe student behaviors, communication patterns, and other learning environment interactions. I also review data, provide training as needed, and access resources, with the goal of synthesizing everything into a strategy that best supports our students and their teachers in achieving the educational mission. Every case is different and unique – it’s what makes my job interesting!

I don’t typically carry out my job in an office. I travel to settings that range from the...
Early Childhood Special Education program to high school classrooms to observe students and meet with teams that have questions and concerns about students who have characteristics of autism or have a special education disability label of Educational Autism. We might be working with students that range from low to high functioning, who may also be ELL students or students involved in the District’s gifted and talented programs.

As part of my work, I attend grade level, MTSS, and special education meetings, as well as meetings with parents and other outside agencies. I brainstorm with multi-disciplinary teams, and suggest evidence based strategies and interventions that work well for students with autism. Our goal is to determine strategies for all participants in the education setting to succeed, not merely those identified as having Autism Spectrum Disorder; this includes teachers, student peers, and the learning environment itself.

An aspect of my job that is truly exciting and rewarding is providing professional development (PD) to teachers and staff within the District. Promoting a calm environment and offering ways to increase positive behaviors for students are just two examples of the types of PD presentations that have been successfully implemented in our classrooms.

It makes me proud that FPS has administrators, teachers, and staff members who are eager and willing to differentiate instruction and embrace new strategies and ideas to help support students with autism. We are extremely fortunate that the District recognizes the importance of educating all students, and provides the resources to do so.