

Students with autism thrive at Camden magnet school

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(Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

CAMDEN - Aarionna Coppedge smiled and posed for a photographer, again and again, flashing a shy smile and holding her hands to her face, pulling her teacher toward her so they could be photographed together.

It was hard to believe that, just a few minutes before, she'd waved off the same photographer as he trained his lens on her, saying politely but firmly, "No pictures."

Coppedge is the newest in a class of seven students at Brimm Medical Arts High School, one of the city's three magnet high schools. She and her classmates in Jennifer Brady's classroom have autism and each have different abilities – some students are non-verbal, while others work within a standard high school curriculum. It's the first year Brimm, or any of the city's other magnet high schools, has welcomed students with autism, said Principal Hye-Won Gehring, and she's pleased by its initial success.

"We're a really small school, a quiet school, so we're a good fit," said Gehring, who added that Brimm students, among the most academically elite in the city, had not been used to students with special needs before.

"There's a genuine protectiveness" Brimm students have shown their new schoolmates, she said.

Brady agreed.

"The kids have been really sweet," she said. "They look out for these kids, the way an older sibling would. They call out to them in the hallways, make them feel like they belong."



Inspirational quotes are posted in the classroom of teacher Jennifer Brady at Brimm Medical Arts High School, a magnet school in Camden. (Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

Rachel Clancy, a structured learning experience coordinator with the Camden County Educational Services Commission, said having students with special needs in a mainstream setting like Brimm "works both ways."

"It's good for them to be among their peers, and it's good for their peers to interact with them," said Clancy, who was a special education teacher for 13 years. "They each get familiar with people of different abilities, and in my experience that's always a good thing."

While the students are instructed in many of the same subjects as their peers – history, language, math, reading – the lessons are geared toward their individual abilities, Brady said.

As students worked in clusters of twos and threes, Brady pointed to Kohmari Smith, who was learning American Sign Language with teacher Linda Lumpkin. Because she is completely non-verbal, the extra instruction is needed, but later Smith would be included in group activities.

Most special needs students are sent to the city's biggest high schools, Woodrow Wilson and Camden High, said district spokesman Brendan Lowe, but Camden schools are trying to offer more opportunities to all students.

The goal is to help the students transition as much as possible toward independence and adulthood, Clancy said. That is accomplished not only through classroom instruction in mainstream subjects like math and reading, but also by teaching the students how to interact with others, how to deal with stimulation and life skills such as handling money, applying for jobs and using public transit.



From left, Brimm students Brandon Dong, Mariano Lopez and Robert Torrez, interact with teacher Jennifer Brady during a special needs class at Brimm Medical Arts High School. (Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

Each classroom life lesson is reinforced by a real-life lesson, she added: This year, the students have gone to several local businesses, including Home Depot, Applebee's, Cathedral Kitchen and Best Buy, to talk about applying for jobs, eating in a restaurant and buying things on their own. To learn about nutrition and shopping, they went on a scavenger hunt in the Cherry Hill Wegmans. At Christmastime, the students were each given \$10 and went to a local Dollar Tree store to select and purchase gifts.

"The community has been really great and supportive," Clancy said. Wells Fargo is assisting in teaching the students about checking accounts and personal finance and the students have taken trips on the PATCO Hi-Speedline and NJ Transit buses. Cherry Hill Racquet Club hosted the students for a day of basketball, running and other sports, and also to discuss meeting with prospective employers.

"These experiences can be overwhelming for anyone who's not familiar with them," Clancy said. "That's especially true for people with sensory issues. This is community-based learning."

There are challenges, too, for such students in Camden, where resources are not always as plentiful as they are in wealthier, suburban schools, Brady said.

"We've had to be creative," she admitted. "And this is our first year with these students, so we've had to feel our way through this a little bit, too."

There's an upside to that newness, too, she added.

"We've been able to really make everything fit their specific needs, and gear things toward each student's abilities and strengths and weaknesses." Some students will work on an upcoming Black History Month project by creating PowerPoint presentations, for example, while others will work with paper.

Mariano Lopez said he's enjoyed his trips to Wegmans and the racquet club in particular, as well as a visit to Voorhees Town Center, where he ate at Burger King.



Mariano Lopez smiles during a special needs class at Brimm Medical Arts High School in Camden. (Photo: Jose F. Moreno/Staff Photographer)

"I got a Bacon King Burger," he said, smiling. He's been helping other Brimm students comply with recycling rules, Gehring said, making sure they're disposing of their trash in the proper cafeteria receptacles. "He loves the interaction," she said. "And we've got the best compliance in the district."

Asked about his role in the lunchroom, Lopez said, simply, "I just do it," and smiled again, proudly.

"For all our students, it's about finding the right fit and exploring whatever they're most interested in, whether it's medicine, math or science," Gehring said. "It's about enriching their lives."

Her new ninth-graders are no different, she added.

"Our long-term goal is always about maximizing each child's potential. If a kid learns to write his or her name and that's been a challenge for them, that's awesome. Some of these kids may go far enough to complete a four-year college, and that's great, too. I feel at ease that, no matter who they are, when they leave as seniors, our students can make good lives for themselves."

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