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feature: a special child needs special education





*Dylan & buddies at school (left), Garrett, a special needs preschool student enjoys a project (middle) & Patriotic Diego (right)
photo provided by Frisco ISD*



a special child needs special education

by deann daley holcomb

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Elementary Special Education Class
photo provided by Frisco ISD

verbalizing for the first time and we see children with autism greeting their friends appropriately,” Lair said. “Our gains are sometimes in very small steps but they happen and we have a loving and caring special education staff that work for this progress every single day.

LEGISLATION TO AID LEARNING DISABLED

The daily progress of students being witnessed today is due to two massive federal laws.

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, or IDEA for short, has governed the way schools teach students with learning disabilities since it passed in 1975. The law has since been reauthorized and will go into effect again in July 5, 2005.

IDEA mandates that children with special needs be educated in the “least restrictive environment” possible meaning children should not be placed in special classes unless necessary. The law also mandates that school districts look at each child individually and not in groups or categories.

IN THE PAST, a student with disabilities might go through the school system without diagnosis, help or support—but not anymore. Those days of separate classes for special education students are over, as students with learning disabilities are integrated in to more and more classes with their general education peers – thanks to creative curriculum and unwavering commitment by teachers in special education.

Frisco resident Susan Clark, a local middle school teacher, has two children in the Frisco Independent School District (FISD) Special Education program and says her daughters are thriving.

“I like the program because there are individual goals. For example, if a child has a gross motor skills problem and needs to work on that they have

a Physical Education coach available and specifically trained for special needs kids.”

The FISD serves more than 1,500 students in their program with 128 teachers and 56-para professionals from elementary and secondary coordinators, speech pathologists, and diagnosticians, to behavior specialists and occupational therapists. The FISD Special Education department has grown tremendously over the past five years following in the footsteps of Frisco’s growing community.

Debbie Lair is the department’s elementary level coordinator. She says the children’s growth and progress is amazing.

“We see children taking the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills test (TEKS) and passing it, we see children

“The FISD serves more than 1500 special needs students in their program with 128 teachers and 56-para professionals.”

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, or NCLB, allowed the federal government broad authority over many areas of education and its detailed requirements changed every facet of education including special education.

With all of the rapid advances and changes in special education, the responsibility still falls back on the

parents if they are concerned their child may be having difficulties in certain areas of learning.

IDENTIFY AND INTERVENE EARLY

Susan Clark says parents need to seek help when their children are young, the moment they suspect their child may be learning at a slower pace. IDEA provides for early childhood intervention.

"I know it can be scary when a doctor or professional tells you your child may have a learning disability, but when they are young is the time to get help and start planning for their educational future," Clark said. "There is help out there for us, from the Internet to professionals who specialize in children with special needs."

Clark adds, "If they are in a regular preschool and you notice something just isn't right, that is when you need to step in and get further testing. You not only have the school district but you have many private individuals who can test your child."

Children in every county are eligible, from birth, for an early intervention program, so parents can contact the county or talk to the local school. The school district's evaluation is provided free.

The FISD Special Education program serves children beginning at three-years old to twenty one-years old. The eligible categories are; Auditory Impairment, Autism, Deaf/Blind, Emotional Disturbance, Mental Retardation, Multiple Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury and Visual Impairment and Blindness.

Parents who need to find out about special education should contact their child's teacher or school counselor at the local school they plan to attend. Call and ask for someone in charge of special education at the school or the school secretary can provide you with the information.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Once contact is made, Lair says the child then goes through a preliminary process of pre-referral intervention by the FISD CARE team.



"If they are in a regular preschool and you notice something just isn't right, that is when you need to step in and get further testing."



David (top) & Tian Tian (bottom)
photo provided by Frisco ISD

The CARE team reviews the child's progress, medical records, doctor's reports, results from development tests that may have been given to your child and any important observations the parents have made. This is done initially to determine what has been tried through general education before a child is referred to special education. This early process is required by IDEA because general education is mandated by law to be the first consideration for all students.

Following the CARE team recommendations for referral to special education, Lair says each individual child undergoes an evaluation provided by the school district. The results are presented at the Admission, Review and Dismiss committee, known as ARD. Parents are an important part of the ARD team.

"The ARD committee consists of parents, a general education teacher, a special education teacher a person knowledgeable in assessment or diagnostician and the student is a part of the assessment if he or she is at an appropriate age," Lair said. "FISD has 11 diagnosticians on full-time staff, two part-time, and six full-time psychologists."

Next, if a child meets IDEA eligibility criteria, an Individual Education Program, or IEP will be established. At FISD, students with disabilities have several educational programs available to them to make sure every child is instructed in the least restrictive environment, or LRE. The general education classroom is not the LRE for all students.

APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTIONAL VENUES

"The school district provides a continuum of services that range from inclusive settings all the way to hospital bound settings," Lair said.

Susan Clark's daughters were placed in different programs to develop their individual needs.

"One of my daughters has autism and they both have genetic chromosomal-type defects, so they are faced with learning difficulties where they don't learn at a normal rate," Clark said.

Clark says she is pleased with the IEP



Teachers, Colleen Kugler and Mary Moore with special needs students Norma and Christian and their peer tutors.

photo provided by Frisco ISD

programs because they are helping her children face future challenges.

“One of my daughters is in the fifth grade and she goes to the Resource Center where the programs try to include her into the setting as much as possible because she needs the social part of growing up,” Clark said. “For her academics she also receives that part of her study from the Resource Classes.”

The Resource Center provides specialized instruction by special education teachers and para-professional teachers individualized to each child's needs.

“My other daughter is in a life skills classroom because she needs more attention,” Clark said. “She has a communication difficulty and this classroom is for kids that can't normally learn about things by observation. In one setting, they might learn how to fold clothes. In another they may learn how to get change back when you go to the store. Those types of life skills will prepare her for a more functional, independent life”. Clark adds, “It's

called life skills because they not only get academics but they are pre-adolescent and they are learning how to transition into being an adult and how to help themselves.”

“In special education an accommodation is defined as a support that does not change the curriculum being taught but does allow for the child to participate.”

It is all about encouraging intellectual and emotional growth, encouraging and teaching students to know their strengths, understand their weaknesses and develop effective thinking tools. These classes help the student conquer the development delays they may have and climb the ladder of milestones.

MEASURING SUCCESS WITH ACCOMMODATIONS

Many types of instructional interventions are needed to meet the goals of educating children with special needs. The students require not only specialized instructional techniques but also specific accommodations to make sure they are making progress.

“In special education an accommodation is defined as a support that does not change the curriculum being taught but does allow for the child to participate on an equal basis with general education,” Lair said. “An example would be extra time for completing assignments or help with note taking in class.”

A modification is a support that actually changes the curriculum that is being taught. In Texas, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS determines the objectives required for each grade level for all students. For some students not all of the TEKS can be mastered so the IEP modifies the curriculum. All parents have access to the TEKS curriculum on the Texas

Education Agency website.

“It is important for all parents to be aware of what skills are taught at each grade level so they can help the ARD team plan for their child,” Lair said.

Along with the special education academic instruction, there are resource rooms and classes, functional academic and life skills courses, and audio and visual services.

For example, Speech therapy involves a speech/language pathologist utilizing specifically designed speech therapy programs for a child, or the student’s IEP may recommend providing services in a general classroom.

Another example of resources involves the adaptive physical education service specifically designed to help children who may need help and is taught by a Physical Education teacher who specializes in children with special needs.



“The job is endless, but our teachers have a heart of gold and a determination to work with our most special population that just does not allow them to stop.”

A student’s IEP may include participation in the art; music, industrial arts and vocational education programs to enhance the child’s develop.

“All of these services are determined on an individual basis after goals are written for the child,” Lair said. “The process includes an assessment of skills. The team writes the objectives the child needs to accomplish and the ARD team decides the schedule of services or placement that will help the child master the goals established.”

The ARD team remains responsible for making sure the child gets all of the services established in the IEP plan and that instruction is designed so that the



Madeline rides GoGo at WALK ON! Therapeutic Riding Center (top) Cami rides GoGo as Tara & Ed Malphrus assist
photos provided by Ed Malphrus of WALK ON! Therapeutic Riding Center

child makes progress.

“Our special education teachers are rarely seen not working in a school and they are always busy with teaching, taking data, assessing students, therapy, handling parent conferences, consulting with therapists, general education teachers or managing their para-educators,” Lair said. “The job is endless, but our teachers have a heart of

gold and a determination to work with our most special population that just does not allow them to stop.”

EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT

Off the school campus, Clark urges parents to get involved in programs where children with special needs are a part of an event. She says activities and



Tyler rides Bella as Tara Malphrus looks on.

photo provided by Ed Malphrus of WALK ON! Therapeutic Riding Center

events like the Frisco Special Olympics is an excellent chance for the kids to come together and unite with other children while participating in sports.

Clark says it is also a great opportunity for parents who have children with special needs to bond – like at the recent Frisco Special Olympics evening with the Texas Tornado Hockey team held last month.

“I think community awareness is so important and events like the Special Olympics night at the Texas Tornado hockey game can make an impact for people seeing us as a group,” Clark said.

There will be a Frisco Special Olympics evening with the Frisco RoughRider’s Baseball team on May 19th and a Frisco Special Olympics Golf Tournament on June 13th.

In another effort to further reach out to community activities where her children can grow up to feel safe and secure, Clark signed her daughters up to begin the “Walk On!” Therapeutic Riding Center program for people with

disabilities. It is a non-profit organization designed to reach children and adults with disabilities by using proven therapeutic horse riding methods.

“There will be a Frisco Special Olympics evening with the Frisco RoughRiders on May 19 and a Frisco Special Olympics Golf Tournament on June 13.”

Located at Willow Wood Ranch in Celina, Tara Malphrus serves as the program’s executive director and owner of the ranch, along with her husband Eddie Malphrus.

Tara is a special education teacher and combined her hobby of horseback riding with her career as a teacher working with disabled children. Tara previously

volunteered at other therapy centers in the area before trying a pilot program of her own.

“As you know, word of mouth travels quickly in a small community and before you know it we had six families and we continue to grow each session,” Malphrus said. “Our next step was to join the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.”

The NARHA is the non-profit association that provides standardization guidelines regarding therapeutic riding, techniques, program management and guidelines for the safety of participants, volunteers and horses.

Malphrus says they have seen amazing success with the children and the horses.

“One 11-year-old girl entered the program in ‘her own world,’ physically in a fetal-type position and making no acknowledgement of her surroundings,” Malphrus said. “Within a few weeks she was sitting upright on the horse, smiling and making verbal



Kirk brushes Hoover as he prepares for his ride

photo provided by Ed Malphrus of WALK ON! Therapeutic Riding Center

cues that she was enjoying her ride.”

Through research over the Internet, connecting with other parents who have children with special needs or learning disabilities and contacting professionals throughout the area, parents can find various extra-curricular activities and programs that children can benefit from and compliment their success at school.

DON'T FEEL ALONE – HELP IS AVAILABLE

Clark understands what parents are experiencing on this special journey. She advises parents to keep an open mind even though the situation seems overwhelming and to remember that help is available.

“There is no brick wall out there – only help,” Clark said. “I know it is hard to hear but remember, the time to ask questions is when they are young. Because those questions are what will determine the programs you get your child started in early and can help them later on.”

“Walk On! Therapeutic Riding Center is designed to reach children and adults with disabilities by using proven therapeutic horse riding methods.”

Clark adds, “Remember a parent is the first specialist because they know their kid better than anyone and can tell if something is not right.”

Early Childhood professionals urge parents to keep a record worksheet and file. For example, write down the names and numbers of everyone you talk to and always have this information available. Make sure you get copies of all written information about your child including copies of test results and evaluations along with the parents

notes from meetings about your child, reports from therapists and any other important information. Include your notes on your child’s personal development. All of this can help you be a better advocate for your child.

At Fisd, parents can count on evaluations throughout the year to ensure their child’s success.

“The district follows all requirements and regulations of IDEA and, be assured, we want the best for every child and family we serve,” Lair said. “We want “no child left behind” and we strive to make sure no teacher is unsupported in this endeavor.”

Lair adds, “I have to praise our teaching staff because without them our kids would not be making the progress I am seeing,” Lair said. “We really have a super team working in special education and as important we have support from the Fisd administration.”

DeAnn Daley Holcomb is a freelance writer living in Plano.