

Neurons to Neighborhoods:

**A Public School Classroom Model for Children with
Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)**

Youth Development Clinic of Newark, Inc.

500 Broad St.

Newark NJ 07102

With support from a grant from Autism Speaks

Who Are We?

- The Youth Development Clinic (YDC) is a 52 year old professional non-profit that offers a range of behavioral health services for children and families.
- This work includes behavioral and mental health consultation, evaluation, and counseling.
- Our goal is to use empirically-based and culturally-relevant methods to cultivate the social, emotional, and educational well-being of children and their families... ***in the communities in which they live.***

Our Work

- Since its creation, YDC has provided services to families and communities focusing on a variety of social, emotional, and behavioral needs.
- In the past ten years, YDC has focused intensively on providing services to children in schools and community-based settings.
- In our work with young children, we noticed the high incidence of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in classrooms.
- We are serving three public school districts in New Jersey with a combined student population of 20,553. Our focus is on ASD students in integrated classrooms and those in self-contained classrooms.

Autism in New Jersey

- Research shows that New Jersey has the largest incidence of ASD in the country. Compared to the national autism rate of 1 in 145, New Jersey's rate is **1 in 72**. In fact, 1 in 66 boys in New Jersey are diagnosed with ASD.
- Educationally, many of these children were undiagnosed, in inappropriate academic placements, or were being unnecessarily placed in out-of-district schools at significant inconvenience to them and their families, and at considerable cost to their home school districts.
- Teaching children with ASD requires different teaching practices than those of special education. In order to receive successful results, teachers need specialized training and materials to meet the requirements of ASD students and the state.

Furthermore...

School Districts have had to respond to changes in Federal and State education law

- Since 2002, the federal government has required public schools to comply with rigorous No Child Left Behind academic standards, often without sufficient financial support.
- Due to budget constraints, the New Jersey State Department of Education is requiring more students to be kept in-district in a *least restrictive environment* for all special services.

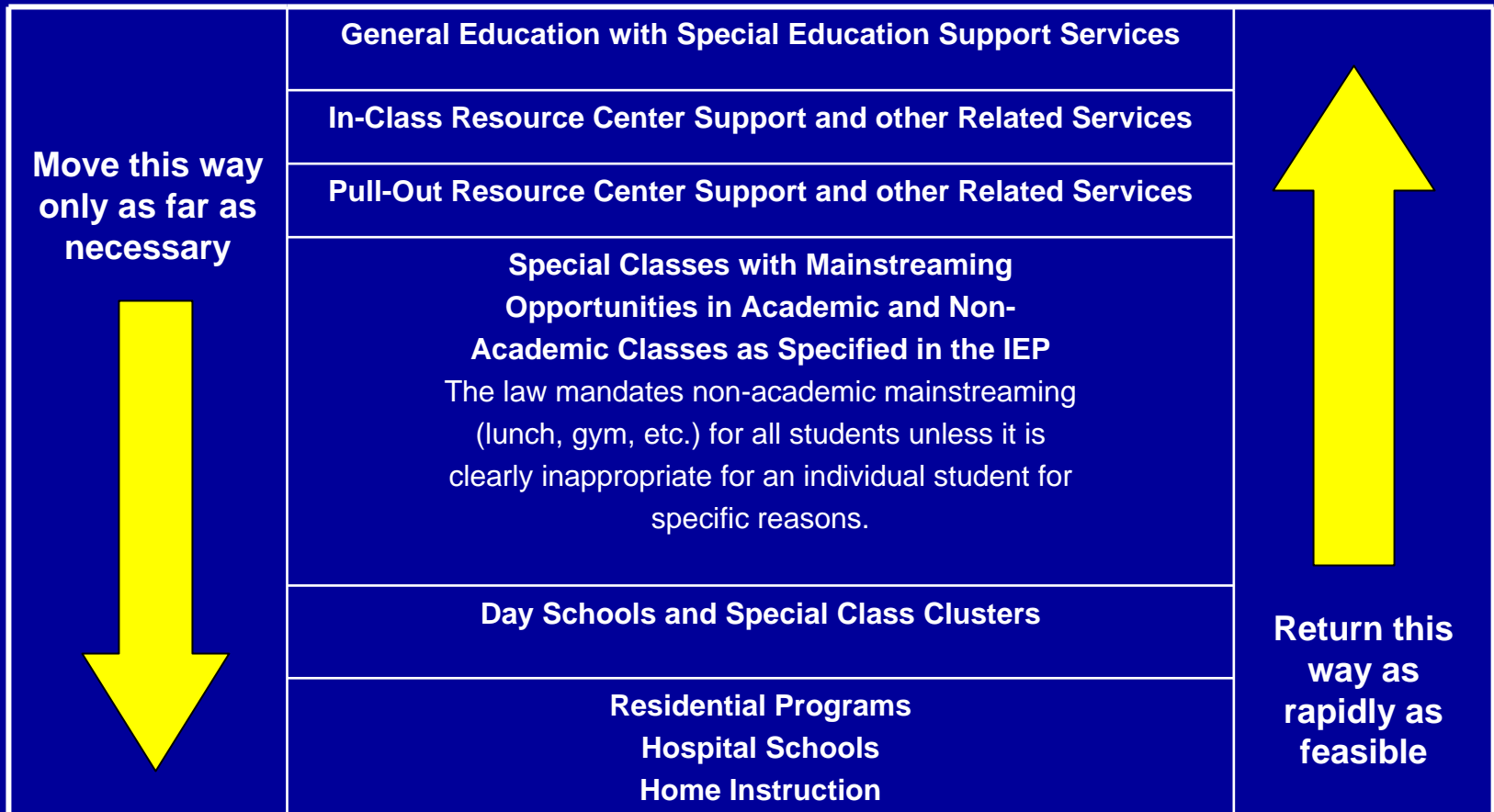
In New Jersey, the need is great for in-district, cost-effective, autism-specific education services. The challenge is that many schools do not have the capacity and expertise to implement this mandate.

Least Restrictive Environment

- As defined in the New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC 6A:14-2.10):

“each public agency shall ensure that: to the maximum extent appropriate, a pupil with an educational disability shall be educated with children who are not educationally disabled; special classes, separate schooling or other removal of a pupil with an educational disability from the pupil’s regular class occurs only when the nature or severity of the educational disability is such that education in the pupil’s regular class with the use of appropriate supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

Least Restrictive Environment Placement in the Continuum of Educational Services



Source from SPANNJ website

Current Trends in Education

- The New Jersey Department of Education is seeking to bring students back to their own public school districts.
- As a public school administrator, it is in your best interest to have the best program you can to avoid legal consequences of not complying with state education requirements.
- YDC can assist in developing the best program to meet the specific needs of your school district and students, in addition to satisfying parental expectations.

Our Response

In response to this need in the community,
YDC developed

Neurons to Neighborhoods:

**A Classroom Model for Children with
Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).**

The Neurons to Neighborhoods Model:

An ASD classroom model that strategically integrates aspects of several empirically-based ASD behavioral approaches.

The YDC model:

- ❑ assists school districts in meeting federal and state education mandates by helping them to build and maintain autism education programs in their districts .
- ❑ meets the needs of students with ASD by minimizing behaviors and socializing them in their neighborhood schools.
- ❑ includes a comprehensive, systematic process of needs assessment, staff training, physical and visual classroom structuring, on-going consultation, and evaluation.
- ❑ is designed to be applicable to different levels of programming needs. It is flexible and adaptable for self-contained and inclusion educational settings.

The Theoretical Foundations of the Model

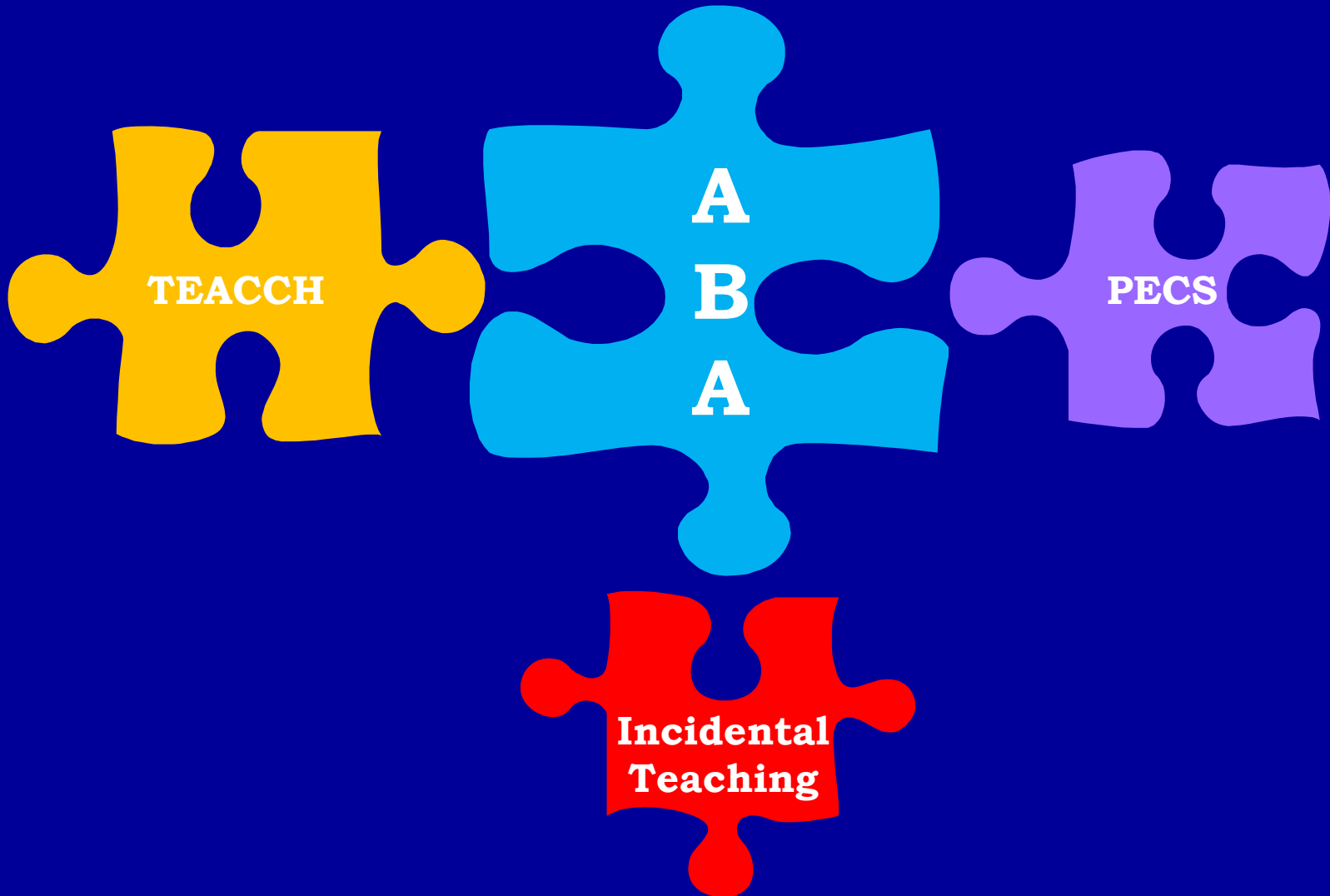
Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA): The formal and structured use of positive reinforcement strategies to produce behavior change in children with autism. Using a one-to-one approach a child is exposed and repeated to a skill until it is mastered.

TEACCH: A structured educational approach that capitalizes on the strengths of children with ASD, including their preference for visual information. This approach fosters independence and self-motivation for task completion.

Incidental Teaching: A model of child-led interaction that fosters communication and social interaction between student and adults. This approach is useful in the development of appropriate play skills.

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS): A card exchange system used to improve a child's communication. PECS are universally understood, easy for students and staff to comprehend and use, and also more broadly applicable than other communication methods used with children with ASD.

The Neurons to Neighborhoods Model



How We Implement the Model

Step One: Needs Assessment

The YDC team meets with key individuals in the school system to determine the educational needs of students with ASD.

The team works to determine a set of goals and desired outcomes that the school district wants to achieve with respect to ASD program services.

How We Implement the Model

Step Two: Plan of Action

YDC develops an Action Plan through which the school district can achieve its ASD education goals and outcomes.

The plan will include proposals for the following:

- Level of Programming Needs
- Educational Staffing
- Resource Requirements
- Parent involvement
- Cost and Savings

How We Implement the Model

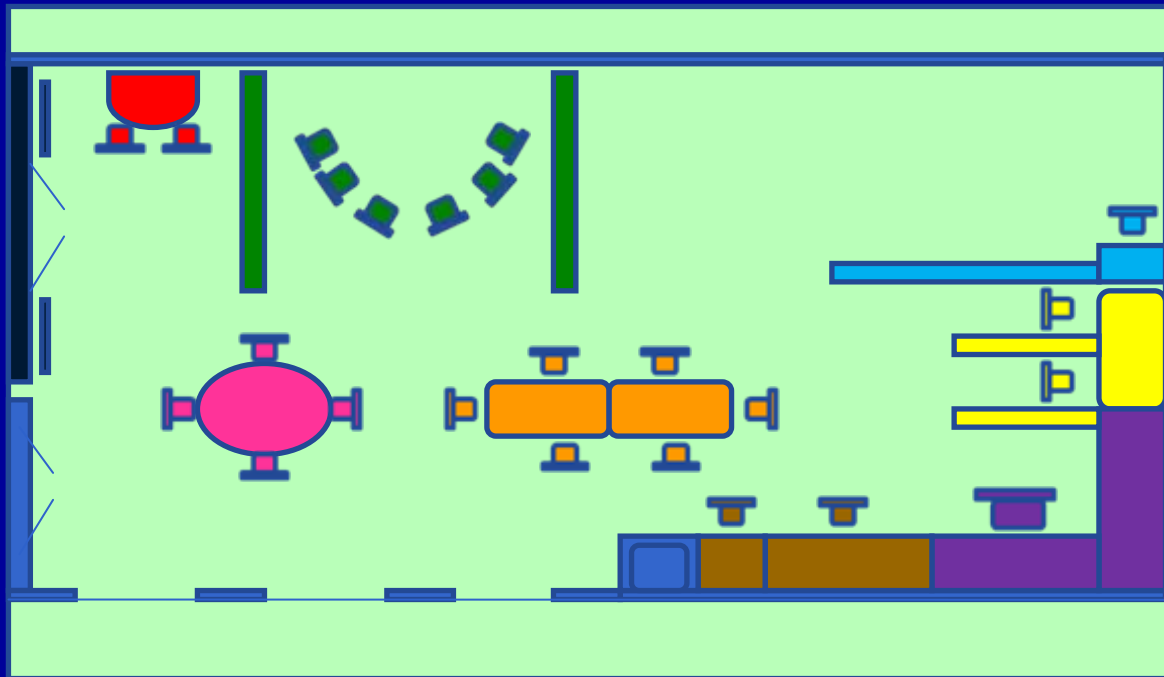
Step Three: Classroom Structure

YDC works with the school to develop the physical and visual structure of the classroom.

The classroom design maximizes the child's ability to develop functional skills, and increase independence, and self-motivation.

How We Implement the Model

Step Three: Classroom Structure



Sample Classroom

Black – Transition Area
Pink – Small Group
Yellow – Work Alone

Red – Computers
Orange – Large Group
Purple – Teacher Prep

Green – Circle Time
Blue – Sensory/Leisure
Brown – Work w/Teacher

How We Implement the Model

Step Four: Staff Training

YDC provides a series of trainings to all staff and administrators who will be involved in the ASD education program. The trainings focus on theoretical and practical issues in working with students with autism in the school setting.

Topics include:

Current Topics in ASD
Behavior Management
Classroom /Physical structure
Learning Strategies

How We Implement the Model

Step Five: Ongoing Consultation

YDC will provide on-going consultation to administrators and classroom staff.

Consultation services include:

Problem-solving for Program/Classroom Issues

Monitoring of Classroom Structure

Data Collection

Behavior Plan Consultation

New Students Selection and Orientation

Behavior Management Issues

How We Implement the Model

Step Six: Additional Services

YDC will be available to provide additional support services to the school district, as needed.

Services may include:

Parent Workshops/Meetings

Sensitivity Training

Additional Staff Trainings

Special Topic Trainings

How We Implement the Model

Step Seven: Program Evaluation

YDC will conduct program evaluations two times a year focusing on the progress of the ASD program and the perceived effectiveness of the YDC staff.

A program report will be generated at the end of the academic year detailing the successes of YDC's services in the school, and also highlighting areas for continued improvement.

Data Sample from Current Projects

- In 2008-9 school year, YDC partnered with a public school district to institute a cost-effective pre-school classroom for 8 children with autism, with 1 teacher and 4 para-professionals.
- Preliminary data from the first year of implementation show immediate cost-savings of up to \$500,000 to the school district, improvements in academic, social and self-help skills for students, and increases in knowledge and job satisfaction for teaching staff.
- The N2N program has been so successful that the school district has continued the pre-school classroom and is working with YDC to implement a K-1 classroom to serve 8 more children.

Data Sample from Current Project

- In 2009-10, YDC has expanded its services to two more public school districts in Essex and Union Counties.
- In one school district, YDC is working to integrate several high-functioning elementary school students with ASD into regular education classrooms. YDC is also providing training and consultation to staff working with students with ASD in pre-school through 2nd grade.
- In the second school district, YDC is working with an established pre-school through 8th grade autism program to strengthen and expand the services they currently provide to their students.

Summary

Due to increasing populations of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders and changes in federal and state education laws, school districts in New Jersey are faced with the challenge of developing quality autism education programs.

These programs are different from typical special education programs and require specialized staff training, resources, and support. Despite the desire and motivation, many school districts do not currently have the expertise and capacity to develop these programs.

Youth Development Clinic has responded to this need by developing the Neurons to Neighborhood model to partner with school districts to meet the needs of their students with ASD and their families.

To date, YDC has worked with three school districts to successfully develop, implement, and expand their ASD programs.

Benefits

The YDC Neurons to Neighborhoods Model will lead to:

- Significant cost savings to school districts who implement this program over the long term.
- Significant lifestyle benefits to students with ASD and their families.
- Significant educational benefits to students with ASD.
- A more knowledgeable, consistent and effective classroom staff.
- A more stable classroom learning environment.

For More Information:



Youth Development Clinic

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