THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL (CDC) recently issued a report stating that the incidence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children has tripled since 2000. Today in the United States, 1 in 59 children is identified as having ASD. That number rises to 1 in 34 in New Jersey.

The National Institutes for Mental Health (NIMH) describe ASD as a “developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior.” It occurs across all ethnic, racial and economic groups and is considered a “spectrum” disorder because of the wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms it manifests.

And while researchers are still looking for a cause, Ramapo College is working in partnership with other institutions to assure that people with ASD have the opportunity to fulfill their potential.

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

The question had been on Julie Norflus-Good’s mind for months – how to get her students majoring in special education to interact with youngsters with autism and related behavioral challenges?

“I wanted to create something, but I did not know what that something was,” recalled Norflus-Good, director of the Master of Arts in Special Education Program and associate professor of Teacher Education at Ramapo. “I wanted my students to experience more of what it is like to work with children on the spectrum.”

In her view, bringing together her students and children on the spectrum would be a win-win; but how to make it happen?

One day Norflus-Good, who is also president of the New Jersey Council for Exceptional Children (NJCEC), found herself speaking with a member of The Forum School, a private school in Waldwick, N.J., that specializes in working with children with autism and related conditions.

“The Forum School serves children on the spectrum from ages 5 to 21,” says Norflus-Good. “And during our conversation I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be amazing if my students could work with Forum students?’”

Three years later, Norflus-Good is overseeing a thriving program that enables Ramapo and Forum students to get together on a continuing basis.

The Forum students arrive every Monday at Ramapo to meet with the special education majors. Since autism is a condition with a wide range of ability levels, each Ramapo student interacts with only one or two of the visiting students at a time.

“The Forum students receive individualized attention while the Ramapo students gain a hands-on understanding of what it means to work with youngsters with special needs,” says Norflus-Good.

At the beginning of the semester, she creates activities for the Ramapo students to use with the visiting students but by the end of the semester, the Ramapo students are creating their own lessons.

“For their final project of the semester, our students create individual projects or lesson plans for other Ramapo students to use with the Forum children,” explains Norflus-Good. “The creator of the lesson plan will then observe to make sure that their colleague is executing the lesson plan correctly.”

But the students’ interactions go beyond the classroom. Since people on the spectrum often have poor communication skills, the Ramapo students work with the youngsters to help them navigate social situations.

“After class, we join Forum students in the cafeteria and we all have lunch together,” says Norflus-Good. “All my students bring their lunch, but this is not free time, this is also work time.” They help the Forum students learn how to navigate purchasing a snack, for example.

“The Ramapo students show the youngsters how to choose a snack, ask for the item, count the change, pay, and even how to put the change back in their wallet. They also explain when to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” says Norflus-Good. “These are things that we all take for granted but are very important skills for children on the spectrum to learn.”

Lunch is also the time when Forum youngsters learn other important social skills, such as how to sit and how to talk during lunch.

RAMAPO’S FOCUS ON PARTNERSHIPS HELPS STUDENTS WITH AUTISM TO THRIVE

By Teri Gatto
“After the Forum children leave, my students will debrief. If one of the children was having a difficult time, we discuss what could have been done to make it easier for the child, and what we could have done better,” says Norflus-Good. “We talk about the positive and negative aspects and what we can improve upon.”

Seeing first-hand the influence they are having on the Forum children has a transformational impact on the special education students. “My students learn patience, flexibility and joy,” notes Norflus-Good. “They get very excited when one of their Forum students learns something new, or when a low-verbal student says ‘good-bye.’ The skills my college students learn can transfer to other areas, such as working emotionally disturbed children, or those with ADHD. It just comes with learning what good teaching is.”

**VERTICAL FARMS VENTURE BENEFITS ABOUND**

“Several years ago my colleagues, Mike Edelstein and Ashwani Vasishth introduced me to folks at REED Academy, a school for students on the autism spectrum [Oakland, N.J.]. We discussed ways we could help adults 21 and older who were on the autism spectrum,” recalls Angela Cristini, a Ramapo professor of Biology and Assistant Vice President for the Office of Grants and Sponsored Programs. “They were concerned about the lack of services, opportunities and funding for adults with autism and wanted to create an initiative to help them.”

That initial conversation led to two key projects:

**Day Program Helps Develop Important Life Skills**

Beginning in September 2018, Ramapo will serve as a home base for adults with autism 21 and older who are in the REED Next Day Program. The program is designed to help individuals on the autism spectrum by providing job training, employment placement and community integration.

With programming taking place on the College campus, the participants will have the unique opportunity to be in a real-world setting and gain experiences that will help them further develop life skills.

“Ramapo provided REED Next with a large conference room and a big area in the Lodge, near the student dormitories, so there will be students around,” says Cristini. “The program participants will have the opportunity to come to the campus to meet with their mentors before going to their jobs. They will also be encouraged to have lunch on campus or just relax and socialize with their peers or with the Ramapo student community.”

Additionally, Ramapo will be providing jobs for REED Next participants.

“I see Ramapo becoming a home base, not just for the students who will be working on campus, but to many others as REED places more and more people in the vicinity,” Cristini said.

“This is a brand new endeavor,” she adds. “In the near future, I can see adding Julie Norflus-Good and her special education majors to the program – I think there is great potential there.”

**Produce with Purpose**

“As the Director of Educational activities at the Meadowlands Environmental Center, I thought it would be really interesting to develop a curriculum around urban agriculture and food literacy,” notes Cristini. MEC will now operate a small vertical farm, which uses the same technology as Greens do Good, a social enterprise that will dedicate its profits to REED Next. Vertical farming allows for year-round crop production while making efficient use of space, energy and water.

“We host field trips at the environmental center, and this will be an important educational experience for students.”

This unique program will further its reach through the newest initiative, the Mobile Food Lab, an exhibition-lab experience that connects kids and communities to healthy food. Working with REED and EcoSpaces Education (a program at Philips Educational
Partners) staff, the Mobile Food Lab will reside at MEC and take “field trips” to urban schools throughout N.J.

“Our new Mobile Food Lab will demonstrate urban farming and teach students about the science of food,” she explains. “They will also have an opportunity to actually prepare food, and work on an art project based on nutrition and food.” The launch date is set for October 2018.

A portion of the fees earned through the educational programs offered at the Environmental Center and the Mobile Food Lab will go to REED Next to support jobs for adults with autism.

“We hope to employ these adults to work at the Environmental Center helping maintain our exhibits, caring for our animals and assisting with the maintenance of the vertical farm,” adds Cristini.

ENHANCE GIVES STUDENTS AN ADDED BOOST

Entering college can be a challenge for most students. But for those who are on the spectrum, a college environment can often present a unique set of hurdles.

Ramapo College’s new ENHANCE program is designed to help students with ASD to transition successfully from high school to college. Another goal is to keep current students academically and socially engaged so that they can fully enjoy their college experience.

“ENHANCE was created because the number of Ramapo students who identified as having ASD has increased by more than 800 percent over the past seven years,” says Suzanne Calgi, a psychological counselor and coordinator for ENHANCE. “And while many of these students excel academically, they often have a deficit in social communication.”

A therapeutic support program, ENHANCE’s holistic approach focuses on social, emotional, and organizational growth to assist students on the spectrum to adapt and flourish in college and beyond.

“We individualize the program to meet each student’s needs,” explains Calgi. “I am a therapist. It is through talking to students and getting their stories that I begin to understand if they are suffering from anxiety, or having difficulty communicating with people. I also discover what has kept them from achieving in the past and what keeps them from making friends. Then I hone in on those issues and help to resolve them.”

Each student has a weekly appointment with Calgi to discuss their needs and to work on individualized goals. If needed, a student may request additional weekly sessions.

“Parent contact is a part of our program,” she adds. “I encourage my students to sign a release that will allow me to speak to their parents and most students do sign the release.”

Calgi also facilitates group meetings for students with the College’s Office of Specialized Services. “At those meetings we ask students for topics they are interested in discussing and that are relevant to them, such as friendships, dating, social media, texting, college stress, life stress, effective communication with college personal, life skills and independence,” she says. “Through these meetings the students get support not only from us, but also from each other.”

Another unique component of the program is its peer mentors,

“I SEE RAMAPO BECOMING A HOME BASE ... AS THE REED ACADEMY PLACES MORE AND MORE PEOPLE IN THE VICINITY.”

- ANGELA CRISTINI
(L-R): Deanna Moschella ’20, Jennifer Mendoza ’20, Suzanne Calgi, LCSW, ENHANCE Program Coordinator, Eileen Camilo ’20 and Monika Weglarz ’21

“WE INDIVIDUALIZE THE [ENHANCE] PROGRAM TO MEET EACH STUDENT’S NEEDS.”
- SUZANNE CALGI

undergraduates who volunteer to work with ENHANCE students.

“The goal of the peer mentors is to help ENHANCE students to integrate into the campus,” says Calgi.

She trains peer mentors on the basics of the autism spectrum, what things to look for, what issues might come up, and she makes sure they understand that each student is unique. “The peer mentors receive four hours of training before they meet their peers, and then we have a weekly meeting where we discuss what is happening with the students. If an issue arises, mentors know that they can call me anytime.”

A peer mentor will then meet with their ENHANCE student several times each week to eat lunch or just relax at one of the student gathering spots.

“We’ve noticed that our students tend to be very good academically, but the social aspects of campus life might be more difficult for them, so they often isolate themselves,” says Calgi. “A peer mentor can often ease a student entry into the larger student community.”

Peer mentors also introduce ENHANCE students to the various student organizations and if necessary will accompany them to a meeting. They create a bridge to campus activities and help the students to connect with other club members. Peers also help plan and lead weekend social events. In addition, they review the campus events lists, select the ones that might appeal to ENHANCE students, and offer to accompany them to those events.

“ENHANCE is in line with Ramapo’s strategic goal of creating a supportive environment for all, with particular consideration for underrepresented groups and we do consider students with disabilities to be underrepresented,” says Calgi. “I see ENHANCE expanding in the coming years.”

RECOGNITION FOR MAKING AN IMPACT

Ramapo College President Peter P. Mercer was presented with the REED Foundation’s Do Good Award at the organization’s annual breakfast in April. The award recognizes leaders in the community who make an impact and difference in the lives of individuals with autism by going above and beyond to do good.

“The main goal that drives everything we do at the REED Foundation is to provide resources to individuals with autism and their families, giving them access to the best education, housing and opportunities to be meaningful and active members of their community,” said Jill Nadison, CEO of the REED Foundation. “Dr. Mercer shares our vision of making sure adults on the autism spectrum have every opportunity to lead productive lives without barriers and we are overjoyed that our REED Next day program for adults will be housed on Ramapo’s campus.”

(L-R): Jill Nadison, CEO of the REED Foundation, and President Mercer