

Harrisonburg Schools Partner With VCU For Autism Program

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record

March 3, 2020

After a lengthy application process, Harrisonburg City Public Schools has been chosen to take part in an autism training program in connection with Virginia Commonwealth University.

The partnership is with VCU's Autism Center for Excellence Divisionwide Technical Assistance Exemplary Services to Support Students with ASD Project, according to a press release.

VCU-ACE is funded through a grant from the Virginia Department of Education. The project will begin in March and will continue for three years through May 2023.

"Harrisonburg City Public Schools submitted a very strong application and demonstrated their commitment to the embedded technical assistance during their comprehensive site visit," said Staci Carr, VCU-ACE technical assistance coordinator. "They should be commended on the thoughtful, thorough, and forthright application to improve services for those students with autism."

Harrisonburg City Schools currently serves 86 students on the autism spectrum and has classrooms and programs in three elementary schools, both middle schools and the high school, said Erin Holt, a behavioral analyst for the school division.

VCU-ACE will assist HCPS in completing a self-assessment and facilitating a divisionwide Autism Services Improvement Team to develop an Autism Services Improvement Plan. This plan will provide data-based targets and define the specific technical assistance and training activities that will take place in the division. Together with HCPS, VCU-ACE will facilitate the team and guide the development of the plan to provide a coordinated approach to divisionwide change, professional development, coaching, mentoring, and services improvement.

The first year of the program will be focused on assessment, Holt said.

"We're going to build on the strengths we have, look for gaps and help improve the program," she said.

HCPS will develop goals based on data to address professional and paraprofessional development, improvement in classroom implementation of evidence-based practice,

implementation of interdisciplinary teaming, and improvement of family involvement and support.

Currently Holt coaches special education teachers on providing services and education programs for students with special needs. Working with VCU-ACE will help her to then be able to coach others on how to be coaches themselves.

“We look forward to working with VCU-ACE in this capacity,” said Sandi Thorpe, HCPS director of special programs. “It is always our aim to provide all students with the supports needed to achieve the best possible educational experience.”

The application came across the desk of Holt and Thorpe last fall, and a team of four met regularly to tackle the extensive application, which also included soliciting letters of recommendation from community members, parents and teachers.

Once HCPS was selected as a finalist, VCU staff came to Harrisonburg for a site visit where they observed teachers in all of the special education classrooms, Holt said.

Waterman Elementary School has two classrooms for students with intellectual disabilities, Stone Spring Elementary School has four classrooms for students with autism, and Keister Elementary School hosts the early education program for students with autism.

Contact Megan Williams at 574-6272 or mwilliams@dnronline.com. Follow Megan on Twitter @DNR_Learn