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TEACHER ROUND UP

Speech/language pathologist **Abby Carlisle** has been accepted to Harvard University to study education policy next year. Carlisle has been an SLP with the district since 2006 and works at McNair Elementary in the Hazelwood School District. Starting this fall, she will begin working toward her master's in education policy and management. She plans to research fair educational assessment of students receiving special education services in the public school system.



Lynn Wynen-Chamberlain was sponsored by the St. Louis Science Center to explore at Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens national parks.

Lynn Wynen-Chamberlain, an SSD teacher at Pattonville High School, took part this summer in a weeklong fellowship sponsored by the St. Louis Science Center. Last month, she spent a week exploring at Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens national parks. Upon her return, she will volunteer with the Science Center and write a lesson plan from her explorations to be posted on the Science Center's website for other educators to use.



SPECIAL EDITION



Issue 4, 2011

Know Your PAC

Parent Advisory Council can help ease back-to-school transitions

A new school year can be an exciting time full of new possibilities, new experiences and new goals. But a new school year can also be a time of new challenges.

Several changes can take place at the beginning of the school year — new teachers, new schools, new classmates — and those changes can sometimes be difficult for all children to navigate and manage. The road can be especially challenging for children with special needs.

The Special School District Parent Advisory Council (PAC) is one of numerous supports available to parents and students to help them adjust. The SSD PAC is comprised of families advising and collaborating to improve the education, confidence and social outcomes of each student served by SSD.

Members of the SSD PAC are parents or guardians of students receiving services from SSD. One voting member and up to two alternate members represent each of SSD's 22 partner school districts and from each of the five SSD special education schools.

Reaching out to other parents and collaborating with SSD staff are the primary roles of the PAC representatives. When adjusting to a new school or new school year, this role can make a tremendously positive difference for everyone involved. Here, two parents share their stories:



We were 835 miles from the home, community, friends, family and school we knew. Although we were very careful in making our decision to move to Webster Groves — and that decision was determined in large part by the school district that would share our responsibility for educating our son — we knew we'd have a lot to learn. Educating and appropriately supporting our son's academic and social progress had proven challenging in the context of a community we knew well. Now he was entering a new school, in a new district, in a new state, where we didn't know a soul. We were anxious. That is, until we set foot inside Avery Elementary on our son's first day of second grade.

We were immediately met by his teacher Mrs. Debbie Jordan. She recognized him from the picture and background information I'd mailed to the principal a couple weeks earlier. With open arms and a broad smile, she welcomed our son and us. After hugging all of us, she extended her hand and passed me a large folder. She explained that when she learned that she'd be receiving a new student who had some complex developmental and medical history, she reached out to a parent of another Avery student. Debbie knew that Lisa Liss, a parent of two delightful Avery All-Star students, was well informed about services and supports available to kids with disabilities and their families. She also knew that Lisa was leading the school's Parent Advisory Council (PAC).

Before my family ever had to ask for help navigating the educational and disability systems in St. Louis County, my son's general education teacher and a parent leader were plotting out a plan to welcome and support us. *continued on page 2*

On that first morning at Avery, Debbie handed me a folder full of information about Special School District and how our home school district (Webster Groves) collaborates with SSD. The folder included information about the Parent Advisory Council and about school- and community-based social and academic supports.

I was impressed by Debbie's initiative and by her humility in consulting a parent leader. And I was impressed by the wealth of information Debbie made immediately available to me through Lisa and the PAC. I have since been serving on Webster Groves' Parent Advisory Council myself. And after a year here, I took on the added responsibility of serving as Webster Groves' liaison to the SSD Parent Advisory Council as well.

Together with parents from all over St. Louis County whose kids receive services and supports through SSD, I have the opportunity now to keep learning from other families and educators. Through the Webster Groves PAC and the SSD PAC, I'm able to help shape the systems that my and so many others' kids depend on for an effective education that prepares them with the confidence and competence to live well now and into their adulthoods.

Thank you, Debbie Jordan and Lisa Liss for thinking about what it would take for a family you'd never met to be welcomed and successful!

~ Rachel S.H. Valenti, SSD PAC Representative from Webster Groves School District

I was an apprehensive mom as I approached my son Cole's first preschool classroom at Lindbergh Early Childhood Education Center. As I entered the "Cardinal Room" behind Cole in his red Kid Kart, we were both immediately greeted by the smiling faces of his new teachers — Miss Carol, Miss Crystal



Get involved with the SSD PAC

- Network and communicate with other parents of children who receive special education services
- Become as informed as possible about special education services
- Improve communication between your local school district and SSD
- Create a positive understanding and awareness of students with disabilities
- Establish a network of advocacy for local, state and national disability issues

SSD PAC Meetings are at 7 p.m. on the third Wednesday of each month at SSD Central Administrative Offices, 12110 Clayton Road in Town & Country

For more information:
www.ssdmo.org/leadership/pac
314.989.8342, ext. 6650
pac@ssdmo.org

and Miss Mary. Also there to welcome us were Cole's new physical therapist, Miss Cindy, his speech teacher, Miss Paula, and occupational therapy assistant, Miss Rita. Little did Cole and I know at that time the impact that these wonderful ladies of Special School District would have on our lives.

Cole's team of teachers had graciously offered to meet Cole and me prior to the first day of school to help Cole become acquainted with his new classroom. As neither Cole nor I are ones to handle transitions well, we readily accepted this opportunity. Cole's vision teacher from First Steps accompanied us to help acquaint Cole with his new surroundings, as well as to provide his new team with some suggestions on how to best position items for Cole to see.

From that first meeting onward, Cole's SSD team maintained an "open-door" approach of communication with our family. The team always took time to listen to our concerns and suggestions, as well as to provide ideas of things to try at home to help his educational process.

After much patience and practice, Cole can almost sing his entire ABCs and count to 10. He also is becoming stronger and learning to walk in his walker, and enjoys feeding himself snacks. All of these accomplishments are in large part due to the support, encouragement and tenacity of Cole's SSD team.

I once was extremely apprehensive about leaving my globally delayed son in the care of others, but soon came to trust, respect and appreciate the Special School District team at Lindbergh Early Childhood Education Center. We look forward to our second year in the "Turtle Room" of the new facility — and are excited about what we will learn next!

~ Stacy Zobrist, SSD PAC Representative from Lindbergh School District

Why I Walk for Autism

Amy Blumenfeld is an effective practice specialist in the area of autism spectrum disorders. She supports SSD staff with effective programming for communication, sensory, cognitive, behavioral and social needs of students with autism. For the past two years, Amy has served as the Autism Speaks Annual Walk Chair for St. Louis. Last year, 22,000 walkers raised more than \$900,000. Amy's passion for supporting student's with autism is evident in the speech she gave at the walk kickoff this summer.

“The question of why I walk isn't an easy one for me to answer. My story is very different from the stories of the talented and passionate previous walk chairs over the past eight years. I don't have a child with autism. I don't have a sibling with autism. I don't have a niece, nephew, cousin, aunt, or uncle with an autism spectrum disorder.

I do, however, have hundreds of students in my life and have been fortunate enough to be a part of their journey.

My journey into the field of education is what I call a wonderful accident. It started in 1995, when a teacher gave me the following assignment — “Walk a mile in the shoes of your future self.” I was supposed to work in my future career, and I really thought this would be a simple task.

I knew I was going to be an endocrinologist, so I contacted St. Louis Children's Hospital and inquired about shadowing one of the doctors within the endocrinology department. Little did I know that privacy laws would restrict my access to seeing what it was like to be a doctor. They couldn't even offer me access to sitting in on brainstorming sessions for patients, and I certainly couldn't be present when they met patients. Defeated, I went back to my teacher to brainstorm next steps. As the component of endocrinology that truly interested me was working with children, she put me in contact with a local Early Childhood Center, and by the next week I was scheduled to volunteer in a classroom of four- to five-year olds. I arrived at the school excited to see the students only to find out that there had been a flu outbreak in the classroom and they were overstaffed. Once again, I was turned away defeated. As I was gathering my belongings to leave, a teacher approached me asking if I would volunteer in one of the special education rooms as they were short-staffed that day. I thought to myself, “Kids are kids, right? Why not volunteer in that room?”

I walked into this new room and greeted the first student I saw, but he didn't return the greeting. As the daughter of an early childhood teacher, I knew that kids warm up to others at their own pace, so I didn't push the greeting but instead smiled at the student and moved on. The next student I saw was rapidly waving his arms and the teacher was trying to redirect him. A third student was spinning a block while another adult asked him what color his block was. As I stood there “taking it all in,” the teacher approached me and asked if I would play a game with a student. I greeted this student and was surprised when he echoed my greeting using almost an identical tone as mine. We sat down to play the game, but the teacher cautioned me that they were working on turn-taking skills. After the student's first turn when I thought it would then be my turn, I understood why she warned me turn-taking wasn't his strength. As I went to take a turn, what I learned later was called a full meltdown, took place. This young boy continued to scream and cry as he grabbed my hands and squeezed them. Not knowing exactly what to do, I sat quietly with him and squeezed his hands each time he squeezed mine, not really knowing why that made him get quieter each time I returned the squeeze. After a few minutes, I noticed the staff in the room watching the two of us sitting there just breathing while he calmed down. The teacher again approached me and stated that the student must really like me to allow me to hold his hands and to give him pressure. In my head, I was thinking that this woman must be crazy or she must have missed the fact that I caused him to cry when I took a turn. I thought they were going to thank me for my time and send me away before I caused any other meltdowns, but two hours later I was still there tagging along with this student. As the afternoon progressed, the teacher shared with me that the students in the room all had a disability called autism and that's why they



weren't communicating with me in a way that I was familiar with. As I left the classroom that afternoon, I remember being thoroughly impressed by the teacher's ability to know what the students wanted when they weren't using spoken language and many times were crying, stomping or not looking toward the adults.

I headed home as fast as I could and looked up the word “autism” to see what it meant. A few hours later, I stepped away from the computer absolutely fascinated by this disability that meant so many different things for each person it affected. When Monday rolled around the following week, I returned to the Early Childhood Center and secretly hoped the original classroom was still down with the flu. (I know, that's horrible to wish the flu on anyone, especially children, but I really wanted to go back to the special education room.) Sure enough, the teacher asked if I'd be okay with working in the special education room. Week after week, I returned and worked with the students. The progress the students made over the course of the year was astonishing. I found myself not having the dreaded Sunday night blues because I knew Mondays meant I got to go see how the students were doing. As the months passed, the teachers in the room showed me different techniques for working through behaviors with the students and allowed me to lead activities with them. Little did I know that my dream of becoming a doctor was slowly changing into a dream of becoming a special educator. The directive to walk a mile in my future self's shoes took place, just not in the fashion that I expected it to.”

Read more of Amy's story at www.ssdmo.org/rotate_features/amystory.html.

Why Will You Walk?

Join the SSD Walk Team, “Aiming for Answers” on Oct. 15, 2011. Entertainment begins at 11:30 a.m., 5K at 12:15 p.m. and the walk begins at 1 p.m.

Register at <http://www.walknowforautismspeaks.org/stlouis/aimingforanswers>.

Contact Amy Blumenfeld at ablumenfeld@ssdmo.org or Lesley McGilligan at lmcgilligan@ssdmo.org with questions.