

Autism Parenting Magazine

Issue 118

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REFRAMING EDUCATION IN THE NEW NORMAL



Changing the Landscape of Special Education Across the U.S.

By Kevin GERSH



Anyone who has worked with or, especially, parented a child on the spectrum knows no child is the same; each brings his/her own uniqueness, skill sets, and passions. There is no way to pigeon-hole the traits of a child, and, as any special education teacher will tell you, every day is a brand new one. Yet, for decades, schools have held the expectation that the student will conform to play a specific part in its overall operating system.

Gersh Academy was created to combat what was becoming an all-too-familiar method of instruction for those on the spectrum. Conversely, Gersh Academy was built with the belief that any student can achieve, given the right resources, circumstances,

and environment. It is the role of the school to bend to the student, rather than the other way around.

As we know, not every student has the ability to learn in a traditional school setting. However, every student does have the capability to succeed. With that in mind, Gersh Academy built its programs, and continues to innovate, in order to meet every student where he/she is in all aspects of his/her life.

Customized plans for every child

With that knowledge at the forefront of our curriculum design, each student at our school is offered an individualized approach to learning to meet every student exactly where he/she is with the goal to meet his/her potential. Instruction is therefore given

according to each child's learning style and specific needs. Often, those on the spectrum get lumped into one classroom and treated as a unified whole. Every day, we remind ourselves our students are on a literal spectrum of talents, capabilities, and skills, and it is our duty to adhere to that.

At the Gersh Academy, we offer three programs to our students, though the student's exact path is designed with the individual in mind. In our "I Am, I Can" Program, we meet the needs of those focusing on post-secondary opportunities. These students are prepared for state assessments, the college experience, and life outside the classroom. Though the scope and sequence mimics that of a public school district, our approach is specifically designed to meet each child at his/her level.

Another program we offer is our BASE Program (Behavioral, Academic, and Social Enrichment). This focuses more on the life skills, social skills, and more functional academics in order to promote independence. Most of our students are given an individualized plan with the two programs blended in a way that matches up with their capabilities. Each student's goals are customized and instruction developed based on those goals so that each child we encounter will succeed.

Preparation for success in and out of the classroom

When we think about our schools for those on the spectrum, we need to always be thinking about more than what's housed inside its walls. How will our students live independently and acquire the skills necessary to provide for oneself in society? The Gersh community understands true success lies in skill sets needed to fully participate in our world.

The vocational curriculum we offer our students exposes them to a variety of careers. They are led through the process of selecting a job they are interested in and securing that job. They are taught specific and individualized skills needed for the jobs they are interested in pursuing. On top of that, they are given the opportunity to participate in the workforce while still being a part of our program.

When you work with students on the spectrum, you know your job never ends on graduation day. We are keenly aware our job is to set up each student for

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success, and give him/her every opportunity to get there.

Within our schools, we place strong value on life skills. Many of our students learn to drive in a safe environment, cook for other students, and prepare to travel. In addition, we offer clubs: a unique experience to many on the spectrum, but essential to build social skills and possible passions.

Our Gersh Experience program for young adults houses students in their own apartments where they can build on all of these skills. They learn everything it takes to maintain a home and balance responsibilities with leisure time. Our students learn to navigate public transportation, pay bills, clean their apartments, and plan their days.





Our Employment Training Program pairs our students with Employment Specialists who find internships that will give them the skills they need to pursue employment post-graduation.



By offering all of these programs to our students, we are vehemently refusing to push the students through until graduation. We are holding ourselves to a higher standard, ensuring each student is given every opportunity and advantage in life.

Diverse offerings to reach every learner

As educators, it is our job to acquire a 360 degree view of each child. We want to know how he/she learns and what his/her interests are, as well as what triggers them. In addition, learn what ignites him/her, and how to overcome their triggers. We know, as different as our children are from each other, the ways to reach them vary just as much.

We provide each student with an individualized plan that includes the highest quality of autism therapy services. We offer ABA, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech Therapy, Counseling, Behavior Management, and the more recently popular and highly effective Equine Therapy. We pride ourselves, however, on going well beyond the typical offerings at schools specifically for those on the spectrum.

Our Employment Training Program pairs our students with Employment Specialists to help seek internships that will give them the skills they need to pursue employment post-graduation. Because our teachers start laying the foundation for these skills in elementary school, by high school they are ready to engage with the outside world.

Meeting a student where he/she is and discovering where he/she thrives is so inherent to our mission at Gersh Academy. For those reasons, in addition to our schools and residency programs, we host a day camp each summer for children on the spectrum or diagnosed with another neurobiological disorder.

Located on 18 acres, each camper is given a new way to express himself/herself and show off his/her tal-

ents. These campers are given constant support for development of social skills, life skills, and independence, as well as being surrounded by certified special education teachers. They are given the opportunity for an accepting, traditional camp experience that allows for the growth necessary to build on each child's progress.

As we look at the smiles of success, the achievements and strides made daily, and the grateful feedback from parents, we know we are on the right track. Partnering up with these parents and students and giving them essential tools, not only through schooling, but through life, has brought us great pride and, with it, motivation to continue to innovate for the benefit of these extraordinary individuals.

Kevin Gersh is the founder/CEO/Chief Autism Officer of Gersh Autism. He was raised in a time when ADHD, Dyslexia, and other similar disabilities were not diagnosed. These children were labeled difficult, lazy, and trouble. Kevin was one of them. The challenges he faced in his childhood would set him on a life-long path to help children.

Nearly 30 years ago, Kevin opened his first school, focused on creating a customized environment for children with special needs. Today his organization operates programs across the US and Puerto Rico: K-21 Schools, Therapeutic Programs, Day Camps, Post-Secondary, Vocational Training, Job Placement, Residential, and a Driving School.

Kevin has dedicated himself to making a difference in the lives of children. His experience and professional commitment continue to provide opportunities, inspiration, and guidance for every child to reach his/her full potential, regardless of the challenges faced.

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