



People and programs impacting our QCSD community

Helping students ASPIRE to independence

The new QCSD program is for students 18 to 21, who may have a mental or physical challenge that calls for more schooling.

By Gary Weckselblatt

With an adult autistic son who uses a wheelchair, Elizabeth Alvino understands the fears of parents whose children have a disability, especially with the clock ticking on their high school career.

What happens after graduation? Can they become independent? Can they work? Can they take care of themselves?

Alvino is teaching a class that she helped create for the 2017-18 school year that has the potential to answer those questions in a positive way. ASPIRE is for students ages 18 to 21, who may have a mental or physical challenge that calls for more schooling to help them prepare to navigate the world after high school.

ASPIRE stands for Acquiring Skills Professionalism, Independence and Re-



The ASPIRE team readies for a trip to work in a school district van.

sponsibility for Education/Employment. The mission of this program is to prepare students to be competent, confident and caring in managing their personal, family and public lives.

Students are taught daily living skills, how to gain and retain employment and are educated in self advocacy and interpersonal skills.

"I'm very excited that we're able to give these students additional years," Alvino said. "Those years are critical for achieving as much independence as possible. This is a student-directed program in the direction the student wants to go, and their future happiness is going to depend on how much autonomy they'll be able to attain."

Many traditional students are not completely ready to be independent after achieving a high school diploma, Alvino said. Her nine ASPIRE students have learning, communication or behavioral issues that make the ability to live independently a heightened challenge.

Some may perform capably academically, even passing the state's Keystone exams, for example. But they have a range of disabilities that makes

it difficult for them to communicate effectively or read body language, she said. "They can often get a job,

Alvino uses the term *adulting quite a bit* in explaining ASPIRE's curriculum.

"It just encompasses everything," she said. "This isn't just about getting a job, it's about how to stay healthy, how to

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ASPIRE

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stay safe. We teach about credit scores. Personal finance. This gives students an extra three years before they really have to go off on their own."

Twice a week, Alvino and the students pile into a district van and head to one of three destinations -- Hope ReStored Thrift Shop, the Quakertown Food Pantry or Swann's Pantry. The students organize shelves, put price tags on clothing, sort items according to categories, check clothing for holes, learn to iron and place things on hangers. They also learn how to prepare food safely, practicing ServSafe protocols for food handling.

In class, students learn how to do their own laundry and prepare meals, as they've done for Aid For Friends, a church-based organization.



"With public transportation being very limited in Upper Bucks, we're trying to develop relationships with local employers," said Janet Pelone, director of pupil services. "These are places where our students can acquire or develop skills and become employable. I'm really excited about where this is going to go."

Innocenzo Martellucci, the district's special education supervisor, praised Alvino's "initiative in the development of the program. She's come up with many ideas and far exceeded our expectations."



Alvino teaches English and reading classes before focusing on ASPIRE for the last three periods of the day.

"Are the students making progress? Oh my gosh, yes," Alvino said. "We started with nobody understanding checks, let alone how to write one. Now they know how to endorse, make bank deposits online, and balance an account. All of them know how to write a check so that any bank would accept it. I think that's pretty huge."

Each student also has his or her own resume, and knows how to search for jobs online.

"This is the school district's last chance to help them reach their highest levels of independence," Alvino said. "We're doing everything we can to help them succeed."

Gary Weckselblatt, QCSD Director of Communications, writes about the people and the programs that impact the Quakertown Community School District. He can be reached at 215-529-2028 or gweckselblatt@qcsd.org.