

Division Highlights



Autism Center for Excellence

Bedford County Public Schools in Collaboration with VCU-ACE Experiences Success



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Bedford County Public Schools (BCPS) are coming down the “home stretch” of their third year as part of the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE) Technical Assistance Cohort 2. The purpose of the VCU-ACE collaboration is to work on systems change to improve services and supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within the division. It has been an exciting journey and the division has made some very significant gains in expanding the supports they provide to teachers and students. Led by Heather Cofflin, Autism Specialist with strong support from Sara Staton, Special Education Director along with the other members of the Autism Services Improvement Team (ASIT), Bedford has followed a systematic process for successfully achieving their desired goals.

Year 1 (2014-15) collaboration was devoted to development

In that first year, Bedford formed committees comprised of many teachers and administrators from across the division to develop plans for providing a training model to teachers in evidence-based practices (EBPs) – beginning with visual supports. They established formal social skills instruction in the division for students with ASD & created their own tools for measuring student progress. The team created a coaching model for teachers, and reviewed & updated their eligibility assessment practices for students with ASD.

Year 2 (2015-16) was devoted to field-testing & adjustment

The EBP training model developed in Year 1 was implemented, focusing on systematic instruction, with adjustments based on survey feedback from teachers. Social skills instruction using the PEERS Curriculum (Laugeson, 2014) was implemented at BCPS middle schools, with impressive post-implementation results data. The coaching model developed in Year 1 was field-tested and adjusted based on teacher feedback, and teachers were selected and trained to be peer-to-peer coaches. The assessment team focused on reviewing and updating assessments used in the division for IEP development.

Year 3 (2016-17) is devoted to full implementation and future sustainability

Special education teachers in all three of Bedford’s geographic zones have received EBP training in Antecedent-based Interventions this year. Special BCPS sections of VCU-ACE’s online courses are being implemented with strong participation from general education teachers and administrators, and the ASIT team is looking at further development of Tier 1 EBP training options for all BCPS staff. Social skills instruction based around the PEERS curriculum continues at the middle school level, and has expanded to high school. A variety of elementary social skills curricula are being reviewed this year, and in the coming weeks the ASIT team will be working on a plan for expanding social skills instruction at the elementary level. Two peer coaches have been trained and have experienced coaching themselves this year (“coach the coach”). They will be accompanying the BCPS Autism Specialist for model coaching this spring, and will be ready to coach on their own next year, which will focus on supporting teachers and strengthening instruction in classrooms. Training in the FACTER (Functional Assessment & Curriculum for Teaching Everyday Routines (Arick, Nave, Hoffman & Krug, 2006) is being provided for teachers of students who participate with the adapted curriculum this year and will become an ongoing part of IEP development for those students.

It is really amazing to look back at everything that Bedford Schools have accomplished in just 3 short years! The intensive work between BCPS and VCU-ACE has brought about great systems change that will continue even after the formal collaboration has ended. Of course VCU-ACE will continue to support BCPS, as it does all divisions and we look forward to following their progress and supporting them to share their many successes and what they have learned with other school divisions in Virginia!

Arick, J. R., Nave, G., Hoffman, T., Krug, D. A. (2006). *Factor: Functional assessment and curriculum for teaching everyday routines*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Laugeson, E. A. (2014). *The PEERS curriculum for school-based professionals: Social skills training for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder*. New York: Routledge.

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