



# NEWS



ENSURING ALL STUDENTS FEEL SAFE AND RESPECTED

## Showing Up: Attendance Matters at Westbridge Academy

**S**tudents simply cannot learn if they are not in school. That is why leaders at Westbridge Academy take attendance seriously.



“On most days, the number of students absent from Westbridge Academy is in the single digits - and many of those are excused absences for reasons such as medical appointments or illness,” said School Principal, Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis. Data show the school has a 90-93% daily attendance rate.

In an average month, more than 1/3 of Westbridge students have perfect attendance –a remarkable statistic since research shows rates of chronic absenteeism are higher among economically disadvantaged students and those with disabilities.

Westbridge takes this challenge on by understanding and addressing the root causes.

“The literature shows that students who miss school often stay home to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment and embarrassment, so we work hard to make sure that our school culture and climate reflects our core values, and that all students feel safe and respected,” Dr. Hadzimichalis added. “We truly are a “bully-free zone” and students know it.”

In other schools, students with social, emotional and behavioral disabilities routinely experience suspension at a higher rate than non-disabled peers, so leaders at Westbridge Academy minimize the use of such action.

“Students come to us for reasons of behavior and social challenges- they need to be here to learn. We work hard to avoid suspension of any kind whenever possible,” he said.

Sometimes, conditions directly related to a student’s disability - health and sleep issues, doctor appointments, and surgery - could cause absences.

“When our students experience illness, whether it is mental or physical, we provide coordination and wrap-around support to minimize the impact of school absence and ensure that the student is back in class as soon as possible,” concluded Hadzimichalis. ■

## Students Getting Stronger with Fitness Friday



Fitness Friday is an innovative new program designed to engage students in building strength, both inside and out. Offered to middle and high school students as part of the physical education curriculum, the program allows teens to plan personal fitness goals, and use the school’s new fitness room to achieve them.

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PROFILE:

## Westbridge Academy Director Receives Award for Leadership & Exemplary Service



Dr. Viviana Litovsky

Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Director at Westbridge Academy, has been awarded the 2017 ASAH President's Award for her exemplary leadership and commitment to special education. Each year, ASAH selects a leader in the special education community who has made a lasting, positive impact on students, families and the community.

Driven by a lifelong passion to seek positive change in people's lives, Dr. Litovsky has been helping students and families at Westbridge Academy since 1981. As the school's Director, she collaborates with staff to establish innovative and effective programs for students, producing the positive outcomes and preparing them for successful transition beyond high school.

"Viviana exemplifies everything we strive for in leadership, compassion, educational and clinical excellence, and commitment to diversity," said Dr. Steven Morse, President of ASAH, a statewide association of more than 150 state approved special education schools. ■

## Oh! The Places They Will Go!



2017 Graduates of Westbridge Academy, from l-r, Al-Raheem S., Aaron R., Beckia M., Cory H. and Derrick D.

Last June, five students at Westbridge Academy stepped up to accept a diploma and stepped out into the world. Each one of these young people left Westbridge with plans for the future, and the connections needed to make them happen. Four of the five graduates were headed for community college, and two of those students were recipients of scholarships to help advance their post secondary dreams.

Aaron R. was awarded the Joe Gorga Transition to Adult Life Scholarship from the Alliance of Private Special Education Schools of North Jersey. His application included letters of recommendation and an acceptance letter from Bergen Community College for admission into their Applied Science and Business Administration Management Program.

"Aaron embodies values we promote here at Westbridge Academy which include respect, intelligence, discipline and most of all a belief in oneself," said Abraham Mathew, Assistant Principal.

Graduate Cory H. was awarded an ASAH Scholarship. Selected from a highly competitive field of applicants, he received his award during Special Education Week, an event co-sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association.

"As a talented candidate for college, Cory will bring a strong work ethic, honorable leadership qualities, and valuable contributions to the school's culture and community, a positive attitude and, most importantly, an eagerness to always do his best," said Dr. Hadzimichalis. ■



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### Students Getting Stronger with Fitness Friday

Although the workouts are an individual endeavor, students are learning good sportsmanship and social cooperation, as they work out with and cheer on classmates.

In addition to the obvious strength building, the fitness center also helps students use and strengthen social and emotional skills, such as self-management and responsible decision-making. "We want to instill self-confidence in the students in that they are able to develop attainable goals and reach them," said Jason Winhold, Physical Education teacher. ■

# Social and Emotional Problem-Solving

**W**hile educators at Westbridge have long been teaching social and emotional skills, last spring, the State of New Jersey adopted five key competencies in the area of social and emotional learning (SEL), highlighting the importance of such instruction.



This fall, School Principal, Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis brought the entire staff together - classroom teachers, clinical staff, aides, specialists and administrators - to review the new competencies, and ensure that measurable social and emotional learning objectives are front and center in the curriculum.

“We want staff to develop cross curricular problem-based learning (PBL) units grounded in what our students experience every day,” said Dr. Hadzimichalis.

“Many of our students are socially ‘clumsy,’ and they may inadvertently ‘trip and stumble’ over school rules and social norms every day,” said Hadzimichalis. “Whether it is because they lack knowledge about the social rules, lack the self-management skills or misinterpret social situations - it is our job as educators to teach them a new set of skills, and a new way of being and seeing.”

Through innovative, hands-on experiential in-service programs, Westbridge staff learn how to teach SEL skills by intentionally creating “teachable moments” through interdisciplinary projects, presentations, games and physical education.

Staff met in cross-curricular groups to design lesson plans around problem-based learning, and to create a rubric as an assessment tool. ■



The entire staff at Westbridge received training in social and emotional Learning.



“Activities may look like games, but these opportunities for social learning result from careful and deliberate planning and through the use of clear assessment tools,” said Dr. Hadzimichalis. “Our task is to make the learning fun and natural so the skills can better generalize.”

## Five Tips for Caregivers

Holidays and family gatherings can be stressful, here are a few ideas to help make the time a little easier on everyone:

### 1. TAKE A BREAK.

Decide on a ‘code word’ your child can use if he or she feels overwhelmed during holiday activities and needs a break. Assure your child if he or she uses the code word, you will respond right away. Giving children some control during activities that may be over stimulating for them will reduce anxiety.

### 2. KEEP EXPECTATIONS REASONABLE.

We tend to have high expectations for the holidays and want them to be “perfect” family times. Don’t get frustrated if the occasions don’t go as planned.

### 3. REGROUP.

If your child cannot handle a large family event on a certain day, plan something special just for your family and enjoy the time alone.

### 4. MAKE LISTS.

Getting the constant chatter and lists out of your head decreases stress and anxiety. Kids love making lists. Give them a clipboard or dry erase board. Help your child make a list of what they want to do for the holiday. It might be helping decorate or what to pack for traveling.

### 5. MAKE A “GO-BAG” FOR RELAXATION.

Work with your child to fill a bag or backpack with things that they enjoy and that help them relax and feel good. Bring it when you go on family outings, car rides or shopping. ■



WESTBRIDGE  
ACADEMY

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"We invite parents and school districts to our school for a tour. Call us any time."

Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Director  
973-429-8110  
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LOOKING  
AHEAD:

SAVE THE DATE: FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2018: "SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING," FEATURING ERIN BRUNO.

## About Westbridge Academy:



Created in a culture of caring, **WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY** is a unique special needs school in which students with behavioral and emotional disabilities are taught to face their issues so that they can have productive, fulfilling lives.

**WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY'S** progressive approach maintains a structured environment that is warm and nurturing – one day and one student at a time – to support each student's well-being.

**WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY** is accredited by the State of New Jersey. Students are placed by their local public schools and attend at no cost to parents.



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### FAST FACTS:

#### STUDENT PROFILE:

Students in grades K-12 with emotional, behavioral and learning challenges. Many are bilingual.

#### APPROACH:

Combining individualized academics with therapeutic support.

#### PROGRAMS:

Elementary, Middle and High School;  
Community-based Instruction and Transition Services; Extended School Year.

#### STUDENT TEACHER RATIO: 6:1

#### AREAS SERVED:

Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Middlesex, Morris, Passaic, Somerset, and Union Counties.