



# NEWS



**HONORING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES**

## Technology Engaging Young Reading

**T**ori Torrisi's students love having ants in their classroom. Tori, an elementary school teacher who has been at Westbridge for the last 5 years, is turning the school's youngest nonreaders into readers with the help of Smarty Ants®!

SmartyAnts®, part of Achieve3000, is a research-driven reading program that differentiates instruction. The fun, interactive online learning environment continuously evaluates each student's exact skill level, learning temperament, and learning pace. Then, the content system automatically adjusts learning to deliver the right level of skill instruction. No two students will approach the content or process in the same way but they all will reach the same critical milestones for primary-grade literacy success and emerge as confident, capable readers ready for the challenges of second grade and beyond. A teacher's dashboard makes it easy for teachers to track and monitor student movement through lessons and growth toward fluency and comprehension.

According to Tori, most students who start in her classroom don't yet know letter recognition or letter sounds. "We are starting at the very beginning," she said. "Smarty Ants® helps my students by providing them with the basic level of knowledge to build on – it is fun so they love doing it."

One student who has made exceptional gains is Jasiah.

"He came to me last year struggling with letter identification and letter sounds. Now, Jasiah can read short paragraphs and his confidence level has skyrocketed. Jasiah went from saying 'I can't read' to 'I can read' within a year."

Tori uses other strategies and activities to build on the Smarty Ants® program and help to inspire a love of reading. Students read stories out loud in the classroom, and do other activities to build context. She uses a cut and paste



activity with familiar sight words, so students can make the connection with basic words, both on the computer and on paper.

"Watching students like Jasiah grow from non-reader to early reader is one of the joys of teaching," she said. ■

## Opening Our Doors to Train Others



Speaker Dan Gross presented at our fall 2018 lecture on the topic of Executive Function.

Twice a year, Westbridge Academy hosts speakers who bring best practices to local educators. For leaders at Westbridge Academy, it is more than a training effort – it is a mission.

“We know we cannot serve every child who needs us, so our goal is to help others understand and use best practices in order to help students in their classrooms and schools,” said Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Executive Director of Westbridge Academy.

Seven years ago, Westbridge launched the initiative as a way to help support their colleagues in public school settings. Experts have covered topics including: Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect, Executive Function Skills, Emotionally Intelligent Classrooms, Behavior Management, and Social and Emotional Learning. In years past, nationally-recognized thought leader Dr. Howard Knoff, creator and founder of Project Achieve, shared field-tested interventions designed to help disobedient, disruptive students. This year, Erin Bruno, a lead trainer for Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care’s Social Decision-Making Program, presented on the important topic of Social and Emotional Learning, focusing on how to teach those skills to students with disabilities. And last spring, Dr. “Buzz” Mingin energized a full house with his hands-on, practical approaches to working with students who have challenging behaviors.

“We recognize that some students can be served in local programs, but that educators need access to tools, techniques, and strategies that have been shown to make a meaningful difference,” she added. “This outreach program is designed to address that need and is deeply rooted in our school’s mission.” ■

### STAFF PROFILE:

## Meet Victor Ruiz Technology Coordinator



Victor Ruiz

Victor Ruiz is the Education Technology Coordinator at Westbridge Academy. One of the newest staff members to join Westbridge, Victor earned his BA in Elementary Education and Special Education from East Stroudsburg University. He manages and facilitates technology in the building, including each child’s and staff’s computer, online learning programs, as well as general technology in the building such as printers, copiers, and fax machines. His favorite part of the day is when he is in the classroom, working to help teachers use educational technology in new ways.

“I want to make sure our teachers are making the best use of data from online learning programs so students can get the most out of their lessons,” he said.

He is wowed by Westbridge’s focus on educational technology: ensuring that every student has a computer is just one part of this commitment.

“In this day and age, it is not enough to simply HAVE the technology, you have to use it effectively. That is where Westbridge Academy is way ahead of the curve,” he said. “Just as technology is changing and adapting every day, so too is Westbridge.”

Victor loves to see how technology allows students to grow. “I have only been here a year, but already I have seen students make positive changes in their lives,” he said. “I love how students take pride in themselves as they take these steps.” ■



# Lesson Planning for Students Who Can't Be in School for the Lesson

**F**rom time to time, students at Westbridge Academy may miss school for an extended period of time. We know that learning cannot take time off, so we are ready with comprehensive lesson plans to support students during absences. These lesson plans address not only core academic areas - math, reading, social studies, and science - they also are designed to address social and emotional learning.

We use "Understanding By Design" or UbD lesson plans. This backward design approach helps ensure that curriculum, content, and assessments are aligned with the specific outcomes and transferable skills we seek to impart to our students. There are three important steps to backward design: identifying the desired outcome, determining assessment evidence, and planning learning experiences and instruction. Each lesson plan is highly individualized and tailored to meet the needs of the student. Teachers embed the Social and Emotional Learning goals from the student's IEP in their lesson plans. Students start their day with journal writing intended to give them time to reflect their thoughts, emotions, and feelings.

"We provide our lesson plans and classwork to students during absences so that they remain connected and have a sense of belonging to our school," said Sofia Ortiz-Almeida, a teacher, mentor, and staff trainer who has been with Westbridge for the last 21 years. "The student will continue to have academic growth and feel stimulated by their success. When they return to class, they will be up-to-date with their assignments and not feel overwhelmed when transitioning back to school." ■



## "My Journey" Project

The journey to graduation day begins early, and for students at Westbridge Academy, it includes a "thesis" unlike any other. As freshmen, high school students embark on "My Journey," a writing project that spans across four years inspired by the New Jersey Department of Education's Dare to Dream Conference.

"My Journey" is an essay that invites students to reflect on personal growth and goals, beginning with the prompt "What brought me to Westbridge Academy?" Each year, as part of the journey toward graduation, students revisit, revise, and re-examine their essays, adding an additional piece to the paper each year. Some years, students opt to share their journey papers with the staff and their peers, and when that happens, it is very powerful.

"I have seen students embrace this task and really recognize how they have changed over time. It allows them to show appreciation for those individuals in their lives that have supported them. This project allows the students to not only work on their essays on an academic level, but also on a therapeutic one," said Linda Ordecki-Relevo, a high school teacher at Westbridge. ■



## Art Smart

Judges have selected four students from Westbridge Academy as winners in the 2018 ASAH Art Contest. Students produced winning artwork to celebrate this year's theme of special education week, "Working Together to Build a Special Future for All." Under the direction of Westbridge Art teacher Alice Juliano, winners, including the grand prize poster contest winner, will receive awards and recognition at a ceremony in Princeton sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association, in conjunction with ASAH, serving the private special education community since 1974. ■



# WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY

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Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Director  
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## 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 bi-lingual.

#### 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.