

Westbridge Academy -
Celebrating 45 Years of Learning
with Pride



NEWS



HONORING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

The Reflection Room: 1:1 Social and Emotional Learning

Sometimes, when a student is upset, they just need a safe place to stop, take a break, and reflect. The Reflection Room at Westbridge Academy was established this fall to offer an additional therapeutic layer of intervention for students. It offers a calm, supportive therapeutic environment away from the social and instructional pressures of the classroom where students can go to cool off, manage frustrations and take a break.

To be clear, the Reflection Room is not a 'time out' or seclusion practice - in fact, it is the opposite, in that the student benefits from direct staff attention and support. It is a space for crisis intervention staff to help a student de-escalate a potentially explosive situation before they need more support or physical containment. There, staff talk, listen, or simply, "hold space" as students process complex emotions and problem-solve. It gives students the opportunity to use developing skill sets before they lose control.

The idea was borne out of a conversation between Dr. Viviana Litovsky, Executive Director and Matthew Clerk, a paraprofessional at the school who was recently honored by ASAH.

"We want to support our students as they learn to recognize their own feelings and emotions before they lose the ability to self-regulate, and become a danger to self or others. It is a therapeutic space, an instructional space, and a student-centered space," said Dr. Litovsky. "Students like the name and are beginning to incorporate it into their language."



In the Reflection Room, Matthew Clerk (l) and Eva Payano-Rivera (c) work with a student as she uses skills to self-regulate.

At any time, students can ask to go to the Reflection Room, or staff might suggest it. According to Dr. Litovsky, the early data are very promising, with fewer students being referred to administrative offices and fewer students needing more intensive interventions. "We have found that it helps reduce the incidence of crisis," added Eva Payano-Rivera, a clinician at Westbridge Academy. "It gives students the chance to regroup, regain classroom readiness and get back to learning."

Payano-Rivera and others at Westbridge see the Reflection Room as another way for students to build resiliency, and use social and emotional problem-solving skills. "As they learn to self-regulate, and use strategies they have learned, students become empowered and gain confidence, rather than feeling out of control," concluded Payano-Rivera. ■

Direct Instruction Turns Non-Readers Around



Tania Miller, Westbridge Academy's Reading Specialist helps a student learn to read.

When students struggle with reading, comprehension, or vocabulary, it affects nearly every area of academics. Some students may have learning disabilities such as dyslexia and others may have received poor reading instruction in the past.

Spearheaded by Tania Miller, Westbridge Academy's Reading Specialist, the school has launched a new reading initiative, and the opportunity to receive one-on-one reading intervention to help increase their reading skills. Miller uses the Orton-Gillingham® approach, an evidence-based approach to teaching reading, spelling, and writing, and is primarily used with students who have difficulty learning to read from other methods. Orton-Gillingham® teaches the connections between sounds and letters. It is effective with students of all ages and considers the learning style and needs of each particular learner.

The Orton-Gillingham® approach is multisensory, meaning it simultaneously engages students in auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, and visual activities in order to enhance their ability to process, retain, and apply learned information. Students are taught individually or in small groups with others at similar skill levels. "This approach uses multiple pathways to help kids learn. For example, students might learn the letter "s" by seeing it, saying its name and sounding it out while writing it with their fingers in kinetic sand," said Miller. ■

Executive Function Skills in the Classroom

No matter how great the lesson plan, or engaging the instructional materials, if a student cannot self-regulate and plan, they will not succeed in learning.

For many students at Westbridge Academy, executive function skills are the "missing link" to achievement. That is why Westbridge staff began a year of growth and development, creating and implementing Authentic Problem Based Learning Units into their daily classroom work with their students.

Executive function encompasses skills that allow students to organize, collaborate, plan, set goals and self-regulate, to name just a few. Most of these skills develop naturally in children between the ages of three and six, but for some, they do not. "The good news is, executive function skills can be taught at any age, but they must be taught deliberately and with intent," said Anthony Hadzimichalis, Ed.D., School Principal.

Educators at Westbridge Academy recognize the importance of deliberately working on the development of executive function skills in all their students. Through direct instruction, students learn to build working memory, problem-solve, become more self-aware, use paradigms for reasoning, and develop cognitive flexibility and inhibitory controls.



Even when playing a game, a student's executive function skills are needed to plan, strategize, and take action.

"We know that building these skills in their brains is similar to strengthening a muscle in their bodies. The more students use executive function skills, the stronger they become. Our method involves embedding executive function development directly into our classroom instruction," added Dr. Hadzimichalis.

As students develop these skills, we see a decrease in frustration-related behavior problems that get in the way of learning. Westbridge students are engaged in solving authentic project-based problems within their classroom or school and are taking charge of finding practical solutions based on IDE founder Dr. Nancy Sull's Learner-Active, Technology-Infused Classroom, a student-driven classroom framework that puts students in charge of their own learning.

"We are finding that putting students in charge of their own learning goes a long way toward building executive function," Dr. Hadzimichalis concluded. ■

Westbridge Director Appointed to New Jersey State Special Education Advisory Council

Advocacy on behalf of students with complex learning challenges is second nature for Viviana Litovsky, Ph.D., Executive Director of Westbridge Academy, so it is no surprise that she has been appointed by New Jersey Department of Education Commissioner, Dr. Lamont Repollet, to serve as a member of the New Jersey State Special Education Advisory Council (SSEAC). As a member of the SSEAC, Dr. Litovsky will provide guidance on special education and related services, and advise the Commissioner of Education on the unmet educational needs of students with disabilities within the state and identify changes needed to promote improved outcomes for these students. ■



Dr. Viviana Litovsky

Where are They Now?: Ryan



Ryan was just 5 years old when he started at Westbridge Academy. He attended kindergarten in his local public school for about two months, but got suspended several times. After five months of home instruction, the child study team suggested an out-of-district placement for Ryan.

“Westbridge was one of the first schools I visited. I was so impressed with how kind everyone was and how they managed children with similar challenges. I knew we found our perfect fit,” recalled Jessica Jackson, Ryan’s mother.

Ryan was diagnosed at age 4 with ADHD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, and severe behavioral issues. He struggled with behavior and social aspects of school and everyday life. He had trouble controlling his anger and impulsivity.

Jessica recalls how Westbridge stepped in right away; they assisted in managing his outbursts, creating a quiet, safe environment, and providing support services.

“They helped him understand why he acted the way he did and what he could do to prevent his emotions from getting out of control again,” she said.

Throughout his time at Westbridge, Jessica was in constant contact with Ryan’s teachers and counselors. “We were all on the same page, alerting each other to changes in Ryan’s behaviors, pointing out what was working, and what we could improve upon. This gave Ryan a strong basis to ultimately reach his goal of getting his behavior under control for the most part,” she said.

After five years at Westbridge, Ryan transitioned to public school. Today, he is in 7th grade, on the honor roll with grades in the mid to high 90’s, and loves math and science. He has excelled academically and continues to create appropriate and long-lasting friendships. “We



just had his final IEP meeting and he is cleared for regular education,” added Jessica.

Ryan learned a lot at Westbridge, but Jessica believes one of the most important things he learned was how to have confidence in himself. “He learned that he wasn’t expected to be perfect, and that he had a lot of people ready to help him.

He was given opportunities through play therapy in his private counseling sessions, and the small classroom settings to build up his self-esteem and learned how to ask for help when needed. Teachers in his classes now have expressed to me how impressive it is that a child is able to communicate as clearly and effectively as Ryan when he’s starting to struggle,” she said.

“His new teachers have expressed to me how impressive it is that a child is able to communicate as clearly and effectively as Ryan when he’s starting to struggle.”

Ryan is not the only one who benefited from the approach at Westbridge.

“Westbridge helped give me confidence as a mother,” said Jessica. “When Ryan had all the difficulties in public school, I was lost and felt like a failure. When we found Westbridge, I found a safe haven. I was given immense support and knowledge throughout the years. I was talked to like a friend. I was allowed to cry, vent, and ask the same questions a million times. I learned to work as a team with the staff at Westbridge. That saying: ‘It takes a village’, it’s sure true, however, Westbridge became so much more to me. They became my extended family, and because they loved Ryan and never gave up on him when he needed help the most, I will forever be thankful.” ■



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LOOKING
AHEAD:

MAR 8, 2019 WORKSHOP: FIRE UP YOUR STUDENTS TO STRIVE FOR SUCCESS, with PRINCIPAL KAFELE 973-429-8110 ext. 143

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.