



WESTBRIDGE
ACADEMY

NEWS



HONORING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

Social and Emotional Learning in the Pandemic

There have been so many losses during the pandemic. Some we can count, others we feel. For students with disabilities, the pandemic stole routine, structure, relationships, connections, and face-to-face learning.

While most schools focused on delivering academics during remote and hybrid learning, Westbridge Academy (WBA) also addressed social and emotional learning. It was nearly impossible not to do so – how can we expect our students to be ready to learn in a crisis if we are not tending to their emotions?

The research is clear: Social Emotional Learning is key to successful student performance, especially in students with disabilities. Drawing on the framework from The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), WBA considers five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.



What is Social Emotional Learning?

“The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

Westbridge staff know that a student could be experiencing trauma at any moment. They may have a loss at home, have been forced to move, be living in hunger or with food insecurity due to parental job loss, or suddenly be in the care of someone new.

“In every interaction, teachers and counselors used direct instruction to teach, practice, and reinforce skills like self-regulation, interacting with others, and decision-making. We provided our students with the skills they needed to manage the growing demands of living and learning during a pandemic,” said Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis, Executive Director. ■



Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis

From the Director's Desk

re·sil·ience

noun

1. the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.
2. the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape; elasticity.

'Resilience' has gotten a lot of attention these days. Often, it is portrayed as an exhausting upward trajectory: a push of our internal limits toward a goal. We think of the old adage heard in gyms or in bootcamp training: "no pain, no gain." But that is not the brand of resilience we teach at Westbridge Academy.

Teaching students to relentlessly push past their limits leads to the opposite of resilience. It leads to depletion and exhaustion. It leads to frustration and failure. Real resilience happens when a student is able to use a skill set to promote their unique personal assets and protect themselves from the negative effects of stressors and trauma. It is both active and protective.

At Westbridge Academy, learning is intentionally rooted in resilience. Since we opened our doors in 1973, our curriculum has been built on the belief that learning is a process that involves the "Four Rs": Rest, Recovery, Return, and Repeat. Across every content area, we teach students to make a plan, pace themselves, take steps and implement them intentionally, reflect by taking breaks, and then repeat that process, making changes as dictated by successes and failures.

Never in recent history has this skill been more important. For nearly two years, we have lived through periods of extreme stress caused by the worldwide pandemic. Even before the pandemic, however, students lived with stress, trauma and unforeseen challenges.

Our goal is not only to teach academic content. Our goal is to teach students the skills they need to respond...not react...to the inevitable challenges they will face. It all begins by teaching resilience.

Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis,
Executive Director

In the Moment - By Abe Mathew, Principal

When students with social and behavioral disabilities have a conflict, it can quickly escalate to a physical encounter. But at Westbridge Academy, all the supports are in place to make every moment – even conflict – a moment of teaching and realization.

Jose and Marco, were ready for a fight when their teacher, Sofia, intervened and verbally de-escalated the conflict. She guided Marco out of the classroom and into an office with verbal strategies. I worked with Jose, guiding him into my office with supporting words. With help from adults trained in conflict resolution, both boys were able to reframe their mindset. Their behaviors settled.

The next step was to bring them together to ensure there was resolution. Jose and I have a long-standing good rapport. During our conversation,



I recalled prior moments he spent with me in my office. Then, this happened: Jose looked me in the eye and said to me, "I remember what you told me to do...you're right, Mr. Abe."

In that moment, Jose realized his role in the conflict. He apologized to Marco on his own accord and Marco willingly accepted the gesture. Both students were then able to identify the real issues and resolve their conflict, deepening their relationship and exercising the skills they have learned at Westbridge.

We are a small learning community, and we know our students well.

We are at our best when we see these teachable moments. This moment captures what we do here at WBA each and every day. We find resilience in the response and engagement of our students. When we see moments like this, our students are showing us that we are doing it right! ■



Do You Believe in Magic?

Students at Westbridge Academy got a dose of “Abracadabra” and “Hocus-pocus” when magician and scientist Tyrone Williams came to the school for a live show last summer. Students took part and watched in wonder as science lessons around physics, magnetism, chemistry, and math came to life. ■

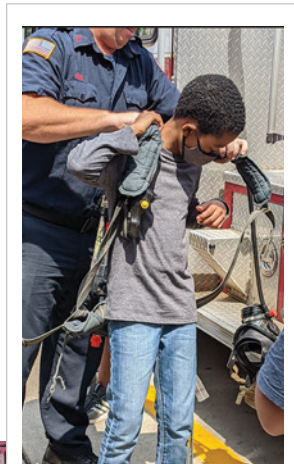


‘STEAM’-y Summer

The summer of 2021 was like no other. This year, our extended school year (ESY) program offered our students an interactive learning experience. The academic content was driven by a STEAM curriculum, with a heavy focus on science, engineering, and the arts. ■

Community Connections

The Bloomfield Fire Department gave students at Westbridge Academy a hands-on learning experience. They had the chance to hold the fire hose, try on gear and hop into the drivers’ seat of the firetruck. They learned about fire safety and how to access emergency services. ■



Going Back

Last year, five of the students who left Westbridge Academy did not wear a gown or toss a hat in the air. In fact, they did not even earn a diploma. Rather, they were placed back into classrooms at their sending public school.

“Most students at Westbridge, especially those we meet in the elementary grades, develop the skills they need to learn again in a public school setting,” said Adriana Perrotta, Supervisor of Pupil Personnel Services. “The learning happens when a student internalizes the skills and tools they learn and practice every day at Westbridge.”

At every team meeting, Westbridge Academy asks: “*What can we do as a learning community to teach this student to self-regulate? How would the student do with less support?*”

When a student is identified as a candidate to return to the local district, educators and clinicians at Westbridge work with the local CST to begin the process of planning and putting the necessary supports for success in place.

“Nothing makes us prouder than to see a student ‘graduate’ back to their home school,” said Dr. Hadzimichalis. “Their success is our success!” ■



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Westbridge Academy Presents:

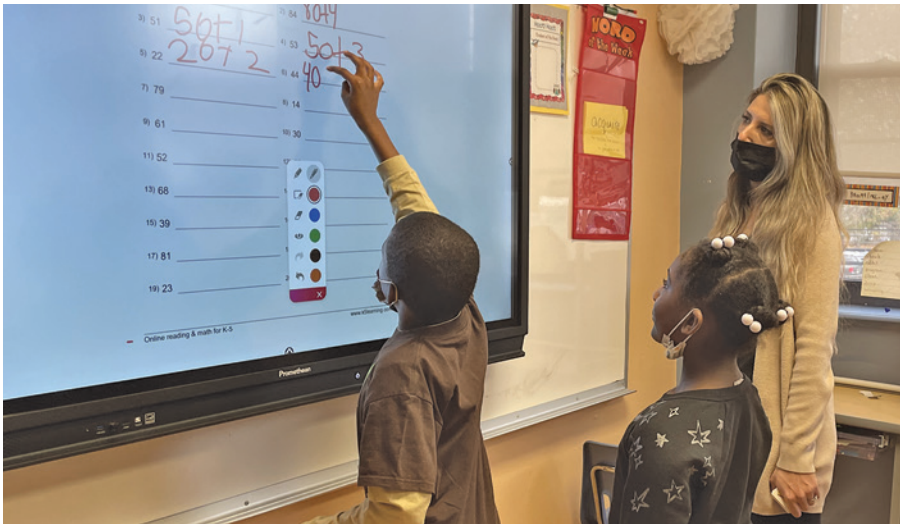
Exploring the Meaning and Practice of Self-Care in School Professionals

featuring Barbara Rubel, MA, BCETS, DAAETS,

Watch our website for registration

3 CEUs

About Westbridge Academy:



Anchored 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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Refer a Student
973-429-8110



Ask a Question
info@westbridgeacademy.org



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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;
Transition Services; Extended School Year.

STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO: 6:1

AREAS SERVED:

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