



NEWS

HONORING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

Related Services Change Lives

For Cheryl Jones, Speech Language specialist at Westbridge Academy, the best news she can get is that a student no longer needs her help. That news came this spring for her student, Keyon.

Like other students referred to Westbridge Academy, Keyon had challenges in addition to his social and emotional disabilities. He had a severe expressive/receptive language disorder, as well as an articulation disorder. For five years, Keyon received speech therapy several times a week. Speech/language professionals worked with his teachers to help carry the lessons from speech therapy into the classroom to boost his academic work.

Always data-driven, Westbridge Academy assesses students on an on-going basis. This winter, testing showed that Keyon’s language, vocabulary, and other communication skills fell within an average to above average range.

“We met with his mom and the Child Study Team – we all agreed he no longer needed speech and language related services,” said Jones. “Every day, our students make incremental progress toward their goals, but it is a cause for celebration when they make so much progress that they no longer need services,” she concluded. ■



Role Model

Brian Coya is a School Social Worker who joined the staff at Westbridge Academy in 2019. A bilingual professional, Brian likes having the opportunity to make a positive impact on the students by working directly with them, their families, teachers, and outside mental health providers.

“It’s critical for boys and young men to have a positive male role model in their life. In my counseling work, I’ve received feedback from adolescent male students that my being a male counselor made me more relatable,” he said.

Brian gauges a student’s progress based on their developing insight into unhealthy behavioral patterns. “In most of my students, I see an increase in their ability to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, which typically reduces their behavioral challenges. I’ve seen an increase in students becoming accountable for their actions, and learning to set positive goals for themselves,” he concluded. ■



Mental Health Matters

Mental health issues have taken a seat in the front row of every classroom. Following pandemic-related interruptions, students are experiencing higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, phobias, and grief.



Anthony Hadzimichalis

One in six U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year, but only half receive treatment. Undiagnosed, untreated or inappropriately treated, mental health conditions can significantly interfere with a student's ability to learn, or worse.

Schools like Westbridge Academy are in a unique position to help. Students spend more than five hours a day in school, so school leaders have an opportunity *and responsibility* to identify, help prevent, and provide care for students with mental illness. According to data from SAMSHA, youth are almost as likely to receive mental health services in school as they are from a specialty mental health provider.

Here, school-based mental health services are delivered as part of a comprehensive program by trained, credentialed and well-supervised professionals. Our services remove obstacles to care such as language barriers (many of our counselors are native Spanish-speakers), transportation, scheduling conflicts, and stigma. We can take time to build and maintain relationships with families and the communities they live in. We coordinate with local providers and work with medical professionals around medication issues, when appropriate. And because we know our students so well, we can help identify those experiencing more serious challenges, and refer them to intensive services when necessary.

We also can help *prevent* a mental health crisis by providing comprehensive, wrap around services. We teach students skills they need to manage the challenges they face, and we support them in their efforts to use those skills in school and at home.

Two years ago, the pandemic forced schools to make major changes to keep our students physically safe. Now, school leaders must make major changes to keep them emotionally safe and healthy. ■

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Anthony Hadzimichalis'.

Anthony Hadzimichalis, Ed.D.
Executive Director



The Queen's Gambit Comes to Westbridge

by Abe Mathew, *Principal*

Inspired by the popular Netflix series, *The Queen's Gambit*, I started playing chess with one of my students, "Joe." He often seeks my advice. When he noticed the chess board in my office, he asked to play.

Joe surprised me. It only took fifteen moves before he took my king and forced me to resign, but during that game and since, a lot happened. Word got out. Now, five students play chess with me on a regular basis.

As a principal, I am always looking for ways to connect with my students. Chess is ideal. It holds space for communication. Students may start by talking about hobbies, home life, and school but as they let down their guard, the conversation becomes more authentic. Chess helps students who struggle with cause and effect as they learn to predict outcomes of their moves, and adjust for unexpected obstacles.

Chess allows learners to play to their strengths: visual and spatial learners see the board in their mind; audio learners listen to music while playing; and tactile learners touch each piece as they contemplate their next move.

Chess requires students to learn and follow rules. It can help them decrease impulsive responses; moving too quickly or without a plan can end the game fast. Chess teaches patience and turn-taking; while your opponent is considering the board, the other player must sit quietly. And like all games, chess gives us the opportunity to lose graciously and win modestly.

I have yet to get a re-match with Joe. Chess is a game of strategy and patience, so I will wait for the right time to make my next move. ■



Celebrating Students

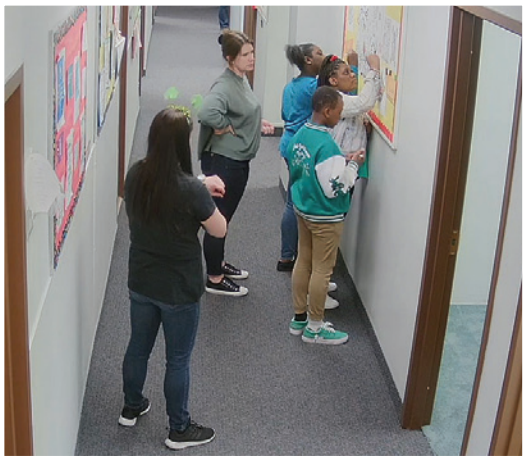
As part of our Social and Emotional Learning program, students learn how to identify positive character traits in each other, and accept positive feedback from staff and peers. Personal notes are put into a bucket and presented to the student. This winter, Sean was among those students whose kindness and connection were celebrated. ■



Bulletin Board Game

This winter, Westbridge Academy students and staff developed a bulletin board game for Black History Month. Students matched historical figures with the positive qualities that their lives emulated. For example, whom would you attach to the quality "Dream like...," "Stand like...," "Challenge like...," or "Lead like..."? The fun part? More than one answer could work for each, so there was plenty of discussion and conversation. ■

De-Stress Center



Ever have 'one of those days'? Now, students at Westbridge Academy can take a moment at a new "De-Stress Center." The space helps students self-regulate and learn when they need a break before they begin to experience difficulties. Joined by staff and counselors, students can come individually or in small groups to write, color, draw, or simply read. ■

Keeping the Arts Alive



The pandemic took its toll on many aspects of the lives of our students, so we have worked hard to help kindle the creative spirit. Whether it is music instruction, digital production, painting or pottery, staff ensures that each student has the opportunity to express themselves through the arts. ■





WESTBRIDGE ACADEMY

60 West Street, Bloomfield, NJ 07003
973-429-8110 • www.westbridgeacademy.org

Learning with P.R.I.D.E.

"Professionalism, Respect, Innovation, Discipline, Excellence"



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

Dr. Anthony Hadzimichalis,
Executive Director
973-429-8110

info@westbridgeacademy.org



Save the Date December 2, 2022 | 9:00am - 12:00pm | Westbridge Academy presents:
Disability and Domestic Violence: When Two Challenges Intersect |

Featuring Dr. Cynthia Lischick

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.



Visit Us Online
www.westbridgeacademy.org



Refer a Student
973-429-8110



Ask a Question
info@westbridgeacademy.org



Like us on Facebook

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.

AREAS SERVED:

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