

Locality: Stafford County, Virginia  
Population: (5) 100,001+  
Department: Stafford County Public Information Office  
Program Title: Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center  
Category: Health/Human Services

## **Summary**

Faced with the rapid growth in autism spectrum diagnoses, the Stafford County Office of Human Services and Stafford County Public Schools found a way to educate these students locally, while saving the County an estimated \$311,326 in its first year.

In September 2009, the Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center opened its doors to serve the needs of elementary and secondary level students with autism disorders, intellectual disabilities and emotional disabilities who required a highly-structured learning environment with minimal distractions, small classroom sizes and intense behavioral interventions to access their education.

As a partnership between the Stafford County Office of Human Services and Stafford County Public Schools, the Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center was created as the culmination of a five-year plan in response to the disparate increase in students with autism, intellectual disabilities and emotional disabilities who required specialized services. Prior to the establishment of the public Day School, students requiring this level of support and specialized methodologies were served in other localities in private schools at a cost to Stafford County of \$45,000 to \$109,000 per student annually. Today, the average cost of a student in the public Day School is \$28,000 annually.

During the first year, a combined total of 19 students were served including 10 students with autism and nine students with significant emotional disabilities. To date, a total of 33 students have participated in the program.

The public Day School is named after Heather Empfield, an autism coordinator for Stafford and the “champion and visionary” of the new school who passed away before the school was completed.

## **Problem**

For many local governments and public school systems, the escalating number of autism cases strains budgets. For parents, the disorder poses an unnerving challenge to finding efficient and sufficient education and occupational therapy services that will help their children live the fullest life possible.

Prior to the establishment of the public Day School, students requiring this level of support and specialized methodologies were served in other localities or in private schools. This type of setting proved to be more costly and often required transporting the child long distances. This cost the County \$45,000 to \$109,000 per student each year, excluding the price of transporting a child out of the county to other learning institutions.

## **Solution**

To combat this problem, the Stafford County Office of Human Services and Stafford County Public Schools joined forces to develop a program that is high-quality, cost effective and services the most high-risk students and their families.

Located in a renovated wing of Drew Middle School, the Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center opened its doors in September 2009 to serve the diverse needs of students with autism disorders, intellectual disabilities and emotional disabilities who required a highly-structured learning environment with minimal distractions, small classroom sizes and intense behavioral interventions to access their education.

The program offers a stimulating and challenging educational atmosphere that concentrates on literacy and mathematics skills and includes a structured environment with sensory integration, social invention, and behavioral support and modification on the elementary and secondary level. The program also focuses on providing students with the necessary tools required to navigate and understand the world around them and potentially enable them to return to their public school classroom and successfully integrate into their local community.

In addition to academics, the Transition Center provides a vocational program of study where students learn the process of manufacturing and repair based on an assembly process. By collecting assessment data, student's interests and abilities are assessed by the transition specialist who determines the student's individual strengths, needs, aptitudes, and interests and provides appropriate instruction in the areas of carpentry, small

engine maintenance and bicycle repair. The skills that are taught here range from changing a tire, diagnosing and repairing motorized equipment, and calculating the costs of repairs. The students often repair lawn mower motors for local residents for a fee of \$10.

### **Implementation and Cost**

Prior to the establishment of the public Day School, students requiring this level of support and specialized methodologies may have been served in other localities or in private schools at a cost of \$45,000 to \$109,000 per student annually. The average cost of a student in the public Day School is \$28,000 annually.

The costs for starting and operating the program are shared between the Stafford County Government and Stafford County Public Schools. Some funding is received from the state, based on the Comprehensive Services Act, a 1993 Virginia law that provides for the pooling of eight specific funding streams used to purchase services for high-risk youth. These funds are then returned to the localities with a required state/local match and are managed by two local interagency teams who decide which services are needed and where to allocate the funds. The purpose of the act is to provide high quality, child-centered, family-focused, cost effective, community-based services to high-risk youth and their families in the Commonwealth. Participating entities are Stafford County Public Schools, Community Services, the Juvenile Justice Department and the Department of Social Services.

Using a combination of local and federal stimulus funds, Stafford County Public Schools was able to renovate the basement at Drew Middle School for the public Day School. The construction process was approximately four months and involved the collaboration of more than 20 departments between Stafford County Government and Stafford County Public Schools. The cost of renovating the basement was approximately \$482,807. In addition, \$127,958 of federal stimulus funding was utilized for furniture and other equipment such as smart boards, projectors, locks, telephones, cabinets, appliances, computers and other technology.

Skilled and trained staff was also necessary to open the program. Initial staffing levels included one special education teacher, one part-time speech pathologist and one part-time occupational therapist. Also needed were adaptive physical education services, a social worker/case manager, behavioral support assistants for each student and student/teacher assistants for overall program support. The current teacher to student ratio is 1:7.

## **Results**

The Stafford County Office of Human Services and Stafford County Public Schools have provided a successful model for meeting the needs of local students with autism disorders, intellectual disabilities and emotional disabilities at a cheaper cost. Students who attend the public Day School now receive local educational services, behavioral supports, and other specialized services such as speech and language therapy and occupational and transitional services that are integrated into a daily individualized program that facilitates mastery of academic, career, and technical skills needed for independent living.

### *Examples of students who were served in the 2009-2010 school year*

- A student with autism who could not tolerate a full day in a school setting has been coming to school full-time since January 2010.
- A student who could not pass high school classes due to more than three dozen tardies, selective mutism, and multiple acting out behaviors is now communicating in the school setting to staff, has passed several SOL's tests and has earned several high school credits.
- A student who had been placed in a private day school for many years and who could not tolerate sitting in a chair and was educated from a sitting position on the floor is now staying in a chair during the entire instructional period with no prompts or physical interventions.
- Several parents reported that they never anticipated that their child "could do what they were now doing" and they were looking for assistance in generalizing those skills to the home setting, which will be occurring with the day school program.

## **Success**

The overarching goal of creating a partnership between the Stafford County Office of Human Services and Stafford County Public Schools was to develop a program that is high-quality, cost effective and services the most high-risk students and their families and to create a program that is child-centered, family-focused, and community-based. By transforming how the community delivers services, it strengthens family connections and improves the lives of the children.

In September 2009, the Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center opened its doors to seven students. Officials anticipated double enrollment within a year, with a student capacity of 20 students. To date, a total of 33 students have participated in the program. The school is currently serving 12 students for the 2010-2011 school year.

## Heather Empfield Day School and Transition Center



*Student repairing a lawn mower motor in the work shop at the Transition Center.*



*Student in the classroom learning sight words and names on a word map.*



*The sensory room at the Day School.*



*Adaptive Physical Education teacher works with student in the sensory room.*

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### Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2011.


#### Program Information

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Population Category (5) 100,001+

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#### Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Anthony Romanello  
Title County Administrator  
Signature\* 

\*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.