

Overview of the New York City Department of Education ASD Nest Program

The ASD Nest Program is the New York City Department of Education's (DoE) inclusion program for higher functioning children with autism spectrum disorders (Asperger Syndrome) in kindergarten through grade 5. Nestled within supportive neighborhood elementary schools, the ASD Nest Program is designed to help these children learn how to function well academically, behaviorally and socially in their school and community. Models are being developed for middle and high school students as well.

Educating Children with Autism, an important 2001 National Research Council study, states that "the school environment should . . . be the major vehicle for therapeutic change." The ASD Nest Program attempts to create that environment in New York City public schools so that therapeutic change can occur, and higher functioning children with ASDs can learn how to function well academically, behaviorally and socially.

The critical elements of the program are:

1. Identifying children with ASDs

Research shows that identifying children with autism spectrum disorders often depends on the school district in which they reside. In New York City, the long-established Early Intervention and Early Childhood special education systems identify many children with ASDs. However, there is a particular need to identify higher functioning children on the autism spectrum upon entrance to school. Children placed in the ASD Nest Program meet both the New York State definition of autism and the criteria for the Program.

2. The ASD Nest Program Model

The ASD Nest classroom is a Micro Inclusion classroom. The kindergarten has four children with ASDs and eight typically developing children. As the children with ASDs progress into first, second and higher grades, they remain in a small inclusion class. At present, there are no more than 12 typically developing children in grades one through 3, and 16 in grades 4 and 5. A fifth child with ASD can be added in grade 3 or higher. In addition to the standard academic curriculum, specialized curricula and strategies that foster relationship development, adaptive skills, sensory/motor development, self-regulation and language and communication development are infused throughout the day. The two teachers in each ASD inclusion class are trained in these curricula and strategies. ASD students and faculty are integrated into the fabric of the school.

Staff regularly co-plan, co-teach and collaborate across disciplines, especially at the weekly 90-minute team meeting, where children's progress is discussed and adjustments made to their instructional and behavioral programs. With a strong home/school component, and a school-wide positive behavioral support system, the school is supportive of children with ASDs and their families.

3. The ASD Nest Program instructional program

The program uses the standard public school academic framework, with substantially the same activities found in other classes on that grade level, but with the environmental modifications and individual adaptations children with ASDs need. The ASD staff use a variety of strategies and techniques to systematically address the need for these children to learn how to have relationships, to develop social and communicative competence, to improve self-regulation and to reduce behaviors that interfere with their learning. These strategies, often introduced in a social development intervention (SDI) period 3-5 times per week, are incorporated into instructional activities and other interactions throughout the day.

4. The ASD Nest Program staff

Program staff (teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and social workers or guidance counselors) must be interested in working with children on the autism spectrum. They must be flexible and reflective, open to learning new things, interested in working in a collaborative program with a transdisciplinary approach to service provision, and willing to take the required training as well as participate in weekly team meetings. Most teachers have special education certification. There is extensive pre- and in-service training on ASDs, behavioral theory and the specific strategies and techniques used in the program.

5. The host schools

The schools hosting ASD Nest Programs are supportive neighborhood schools with a strong academic focus, collaborative staff and experienced leadership. They are committed to adopting a school-wide positive behavioral approach. In 2012 there are 19 elementary schools, one elementary/middle school (grades 3-7), five middle schools, one high school and one middle/high school (grades 6-9) hosting Nest programs. In the coming years, the DoE has committed to opening as many middle school programs as are needed to accommodate the elementary school children with ASDs.

6. Strategic support

Program funding, which is comparable to other DoE programs for children with ASDs, is sufficiently flexible that it can be adapted to local school conditions and individual children's needs. The DoE provides extensive training for all staff working in the program and ongoing support from both DoE and external consultants to help ensure the model's fidelity. The DoE trains clinical staff to evaluate and place children in the program.

There are more than 600 children with ASDs and more than 2,000 typically developing children in the Nest program in 2012-13. More than 350 teachers and 150 related service providers work with these children in 159 Nest classrooms across the 27 schools hosting the program. In addition, two Intensive Kindergarten classrooms each serve six children who need a year of intensive support before becoming eligible for the ASD Nest kindergarten. The DoE launched a Dual Language Nest kindergarten at PS 112 as well.