



# At the Helm: Leading an Autism School to Success

By Jill HR Hirsch, M.S.Ed.

Principals don't just steer the ship. Those of us who accept the challenge of educating tomorrow's adults are not unlike Russell Crowe's character, Jack Aubrey, in the 2003 epic movie, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. Our role, as Captain of the ship, is to lead by example, set the tone for our crew, know the waters and navigate in fair weather and foul to reach our destination. When we steer a ship that involves educating students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), it can, indeed, feel like a voyage to the far side of the world. We regularly find ourselves in uncharted waters. We are not just commanders; we are explorers. To be effective, we must be willing to take risks, at times pushing our crew – and ourselves – to our limits and then beyond. Although helping students on the autism spectrum is rife with obstacles and challenges for any school leader, it's still the most rewarding work I can imagine.

During my time as a teacher in the trenches of everyday education, and then principal of two Camelot therapeutic day schools, I learned many valuable lessons that helped my students and staff members succeed. Setting the right example is invaluable, as is hiring the best staff and taking a multi-pronged approach to build students' skills. The hard-won wisdom gained through working with teachers, colleagues and parents as a team helped us propel our students to become the best they could be. A few of the lessons we learned follow.



## Build the Right Team

Hiring the right team members is vital. Look for individuals who express their eagerness to learn throughout the interview process. Potential team members need to have a desire to work with children, with or without disabilities, but they should also have a special understanding of the unique challenges autistic students face. When touring the facility, they should be curious, demonstrate their knowledge of students with special needs, and ask probing questions about the school's activities and policies.

When hiring staff members to work with students in our autism program, I look for many personality traits. Patience, kindness, and determination are a must. It is also important to hire staff members who are organized, capable, and able to adapt when situations do not go as planned. Children with autism benefit from a stable structure to their day. They need to follow a routine, so the faculty must be organized enough to present a schedule ahead of time.

Educators must also show flexibility to shift their schedules if necessary. Only when students with autism become comfortable with their schedule will they start to feel comfortable adapting to changes. Faculty must first possess adaptability themselves to teach students that quality.

Once a principal builds the right team, however, the job isn't done. School leaders should emphasize the importance of continuing education. Ongoing teacher training exposes educators to new safety techniques and the best emerging evidence-based methods to help spectrum students learn behavioral, developmental, and social foundations.

One example is the Picture Exchange Communication System, or PECS. While students on the autism spectrum have difficulty following verbal instructions, PECS helps educators use pictures to demonstrate new skills like turn-taking or behaviors like hand washing. Only continuing education will bring great new tools like PECS into your classrooms.



## Be an Example

Students model the actions that others around them demonstrate. The same goes for adults. The principal plays a key top-down role in setting the overall tone for the school by displaying the behaviors desired in his or her education staff. In turn, staff members at all levels should exhibit the behaviors we teach our students. If we use re-direction and modeling of appropriate behaviors and responses, our students will learn those techniques.

Effective communication skills are a huge piece of this puzzle, for principal, staff and students alike. Autism spectrum students need to work on both verbal and nonverbal communication and learn to express their wants and needs appropriately. These students have difficulty focusing and listening when others are speaking to them. They struggle with social thinking, and the resultant social behaviors, such as greeting a classmate by saying, "Hi. How are you?" When school leaders and teachers model functional, effective communication skills day after day, we become a consistent example for our students.



## Adopt a Multi-Pronged Approach

As a principal, there are many strategies we encourage our staff to use when working with students on the autism spectrum. A program with a variety of approaches ensures students improve in various areas of functioning. Camelot's specific programming involves making the curriculum specific to the core academics, functional behavior teachings, Individual Education Plan (IEP), and family and therapy needs. All components need to be addressed appropriately and simultaneously.

Principals also can foster learning by providing a variety of training activities and role-playing opportunities for students. Schools can benefit from play therapy, pet therapy, equine therapy, art therapy, and music therapy. These activities can reach students on the autism spectrum in ways traditional teaching methods simply cannot.

As part of a multi-pronged approach, school leaders should ensure students' many goals and needs are being addressed on a daily basis. The responsibility falls on all of us to be involved. It is not only the teacher teaching, but the individual assistants and classroom assistants, the therapists working with the students individually and in groups, as well as the principal taking time to create the repeated experiences that will help these students learn new skills and gain confidence in their abilities.



## Stay Involved

Teaching students with autism requires vigilance. The principal, clinical director, or other leaders in the environment need to be very involved and active in the learning that is taking place. Any curriculum brought into the lessons and classrooms should be evaluated and geared to the needs of the individual student. What works for one student with ASD

# Captain on Deck!

A principal's vision and leadership can bring about amazing results in the students we serve. Each success fuels us and sustains us on our voyage.

**Chris** came to Camelot's new facility in Hoffman Estates, Illinois in 2006. He was able to smile, and I could tell he enjoyed being around other people. However, he exhibited aggression and spoke in profanity.

Chris became very frustrated when struggling to communicate with his teacher, but his behavior did not frustrate the teacher. Instead, she continued to work with Chris using the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which allows students who cannot communicate through vocalization to do so through the use of pictures.

Chris' speech-language pathologist (SLP) worked to help him communicate his feelings. Chris' occupational therapists (OT) also developed a sensory diet for Chris that provided an appropriate way to release energy and calming strategies for times when he was overloaded.

Since he seemed to enjoy being around other students, Chris attended physical education classes with the high school students. Chris would have so much fun laughing, running and being with his friends.

Together, all of these things helped Chris learn and grow. He began smiling and saying "hi" and "bye" in appropriate situations. He began a job in the school requiring social interaction. He also learned to wait an appropriate amount of time for responses to his requests instead of yelling or hitting. His aggression and profanity subsided.

**Madeline** is a very active girl who loves to run. She is verbal but mostly exhibits echolalia, repeating what others say in place of typical communication. She needs constant supervision, since she has been known to knock all items off shelves within seconds and eat play dough, but her teacher knew this adorable little girl had so much potential!

Madeline and her assistant worked each week with the SLP to develop eye contact and communicate, first using single words and progressing to sentences. Her instructors also introduced her to a modified version of the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autism and related Communication-handicapped Children) method, which helps her function as independently as possible in her environment.

Madeline has been at Camelot for more than a year. She is now asking for items appropriately, and she has been engaging with other students. Her aggression toward others has dramatically decreased, and she is making incredible academic progress too. Her whole family is thrilled to see her doing so well.

may not for another. Incorporating different interventions requires lots of time, but the principal must stay involved in the school's everyday experiences in order to make the best decisions for the students.

## Be Approachable

Teachers need to know they have approachable school leaders who understand what it's like to work with autistic children. Educators need access to constant educational support as well as emotional support, and they need a safe place to discuss their frustrations and accomplishments.

As a principal, I had an open door policy. I could be a listener, or I could give feedback. Solutions to problems would often arise through conversation, often by the teachers themselves. The administrator does not have to do all the problem solving or dictate all aspects of situations. By letting staff members know I was there to help them with any problem, the final outcome was the best care for our students.

## Hold True to the Vision

Principals alone cannot fulfill a school's mission and vision; they need to actively guide staff to also do so. At times that may require difficult decisions, changes in staff, or creative brainstorming to stay true to the course. But without strong leadership, and a commander who demonstrates, in words and actions, the vision and mission of the school, even the best of staff will waver. It all starts at the top.

During my time as principal, Camelot's vision of unlocking the potential in every child was a joy to reinforce in our staff and our students. Our collective goal was to reach that potential, no matter how severe a child's disabilities. That attitude of hope and possibility helped everyone in the school stay focused on our students and their needs. In whatever we did, whatever decision we made, we stayed focused on our vision: to look at each child not just as he or she is today, but as what he or she can become. Our students with autism hold great potential inside to learn and grow. I have to agree with Capt. Jack's opinion of the role we play in our students' lives: "The courage to do the impossible lies in the hearts of men." ■

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