

Friday, Dec 08, 2017

## Oakland University, Pontiac Schools partner for program to help students with autism

A partnership between Oakland University's Department of Human Development and Child Studies (HDGS), the Oakland University Center for Autism Outreach Services (OUCARES), and the Pontiac School District is helping students living with an Autism Spectrum Disorder learn how to socialize, communicate and develop the skills needed for future work environments.

"The students have various skill levels," said Dr. Jan Graetz, an associate professor in special education at Oakland University. "Some are very verbal and others are just learning about how to communicate and interact with others."

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the name for a group of developmental disorders. It includes a wide range, or "spectrum," of symptoms, skills, and levels of disability often characterized by ongoing social problems that include repetitive behavior, limited interests, and difficulty communicating and interacting with others.

"Since many students with autism enjoy a predictable schedule and routine, we provide an environment that provides that predictability," Graetz said. "At the same time, we include new activities that give students an opportunity to learn new skills."

Graetz developed the work-study program with assistance from graduate assistants at HDGS, as well as teachers and staff from Pontiac High School's Autism Program.

"I had befriended a teacher in their autism program a few years ago and we began discussing the need for more social opportunities for students in the program," she said. "I then spoke with Carol Swift, our department chair at that time, and identified some work tasks that we felt would be appropriate for the students. We wanted to ensure the students had an opportunity to socialize and interact with staff and faculty."



Students from Pontiac Middle School are learning how to socialize, communicate and develop the skills needed for future work environments thanks to a work-study program developed by Oakland University's Department of Human Development and Child Studies (HDGS), the Oakland University Center for Autism Outreach Service (OUCARES), and the Pontiac School District.



*The students are assigned various tasks, such as shredding documents or collating binders, to work on.*

While the work-study program began with three students from Pontiac High School, it has grown to include students with autism from Pontiac Middle School, as well.

"This semester we have six students working with us from the autism program at Pontiac Middle School," she said. "Typically, a teacher and one paraprofessional accompanies the students to OU. It has always been a pleasure to work with the staff from the Pontiac School District and it is evident they see the benefit of expanding the school day to include Oakland University."

The program has continued to receive support from OU faculty, staff and students, as well.

"Our current department chair, Dr. Ambika Bhargava, continues to support the program and encourages the involvement of Oakland University," Graetz said. "This semester, Brittany Mirsberger, one of our graduate assistants, is also working closely with the students to promote socialization skills and appropriate behaviors. She is very passionate about working with adolescents on the autism spectrum."

According to Graetz, the students are transported by bus to Oakland University on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. They are greeted by faculty and staff and assigned various tasks, such as shredding documents or collating binders, to work on throughout Pawley Hall.

"Recently, students created seasonal crafts," Graetz said. "Last year we made paper bricks from the paper they shredded. For this

donations are then returned to the Pontiac Autism School and used to support their program. So, if you see our students in the building, please take a moment to introduce yourself and welcome them to OU."

For more information about the program, contact Dr. Jan Graetz at [graetz@oakland.edu](mailto:graetz@oakland.edu).