

A Star Room in every public school!

The Love, Andrew Autism Foundation has astronomical goals for the Star Room.

Plain Township, Ohio, is home to a new “star” that’s “been an incredible, incredible success,” says Mark Parent, special education director for the 6,000-student Plain Local Schools district.

The stellar success in Plain is the “Star Room” at the district’s Glenwood Intermediate School. It’s the first such sensory resource space installed with support of the Love, Andrew Autism Foundation (LAAF), which has a vision to put a Star Room in every public school.

The Star Room is a calming therapeutic environment in the school created for children with autism and other issues, such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, that present challenges related to sensory processing and over-stimulation. Just like children with physical disabilities, children with autism and ADHD need environmental accommodations at school.

The Star Room provides a setting, furnishings and tools to help reduce students’ stress. Features include lighting that eliminates flickering; acoustics to reduce reverberation; lockable cabinetry to minimize clutter; calming colors and soft furniture to promote comfort; and sensory items such as fidget-management devices, weighted vests and blankets, tents, swings and ball pits.

The behavioral manifestations of sensory and over-stimulation challenges can become more pronounced in larger school settings where inclusion is a high priority. That was the case in Plain, Parent says.

The Plain district, near Canton, Ohio, created “a little bit of a perfect storm” when it consolidated intermediate students on one campus at Glenwood, says Parent. With more than 900 fifth- and sixth-graders in one space, he said, “It kind of gave us the heightened awareness” of the need for services and resources for students with autism, ADD/ADHD and other disorders.

Among the students on the Glenwood campus is Andrew Schumacher, who will be in sixth grade this year.

Andrew is the namesake of the Love, Andrew Autism Foundation – founded by his mother, Nicole Schumacher, who, Parent says, “has been instrumental, not only in our district, but in our county as a support person.”



Nicole and the foundation partnered with Schumacher Homes – a custom home-builder founded and owned by her husband, Paul – to discuss with Parent “what we could do at Glenwood to enhance learning opportunities for not just students who are on the autism spectrum, but also students who struggle” with ADHD, stress-related behaviors and other sensory challenges.

“We started the conversation well before Andrew even became a Glenwood Intermediate student,” Parent says, “because as we looked at the Plain Local Schools and our demographics and our student needs,” the intermediate school campus “was the most logical environment for the sensory room.” During the last academic year, Parent says, 16 students identified as on the autism spectrum were among 111 Glenwood students with disabilities.

Discussion of the Star Room started before the fall 2013 academic year began, Parent says. The resource was fully implemented early in 2014 and “was a work in progress throughout the school year.”

“The teachers see it as an incredible benefit,” Parent says. Since the Star Room was introduced “Students that would

have before been highly agitated by some of the smaller things that they couldn’t get over in that day” are “... now able to de-escalate and come back and the teachers now say they’re able to access learning to a much higher degree.”

“In years past,” Parent says, “there was sometimes the case where the behaviors would continue to escalate and at some point it would lead to the child going home early or missing school, or missing large chunks of the school day.”

Parent says the goal is for students to be “out of that classroom to the least extent possible, but when they return, they actually return able to learn and ready to learn.”

“So as kids come in and access the sensory room it’s a very, very purposeful space,” Parent says. When a child needs to de-escalate “they go in and it’s purposeful time. It’s timed. They have choices to make to de-escalate. We monitor that time and we monitor the choices. And the goal being that once they de-escalate, we get them back into the environment they came from successfully, where they are able to continue learning.”

Since students have had access to the Star Room, Parent says, “Our time on task for kids is greatly improved.”

“It’s been an incredible, incredible success. The kids understood the benefit immediately because they felt the benefit themselves of being able to maintain in the school environment.

“It’s been a godsend,” Parent said. “I can’t think of a better word than it’s truly been a godsend to our kids.”

The Love, Andrew Autism Foundation (LAAF) is a nonprofit organization that works to educate and inform the public regarding awareness, understanding and response for the autism condition in children. Their first investment in children is the creation and development of the Star Room. ■

For more information about the Love, Andrew Autism Foundation, or the Star Room, visit www.loveandrew.org.