

NHS School teaching needed skills

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Young children were working on their math and writing skills in two classrooms at the NHS Human Services Schools Thursday morning while the older students were preparing pierogies, salad and cupcakes for lunch.

All were learning needed skills, said education director Helen Tautkus-Berry. Some children are not able to be in a regular classroom because of developmental or behavioral problems.

“We blend behavioral and academic learning through hands-on lessons,” Tautkus-Berry said. “These children have to work on their behavior because they have difficulty in public school. Our goal is to teach them the skills that are necessary for success and to transition them back to their home school district. We’ve been very successful in transitioning them back.”

The school, located at 892 Stoystown Road, Somerset, is a licensed private school that has been at that location since 2011. There are 11 students, three teachers and two personal care aides. The school is for students ages 5 to 21.

Students who are referred to the school may be there for three to six months or for a year or two. The curriculum is aligned with the public school so they won’t be behind the other students. Students with autism may be at the school their entire academic career. Children are also able to receive speech therapy, occupational therapy or physical therapy if needed. Tuition and transportation costs are paid by the public school district or through mental health and mental retardation, depending on the child’s diagnosis.

“For some children, peer relationships, communication and other skills don’t come naturally,” said Michele Hauer, senior staff person. “We have the Olweus Bullying programs because our kids can be targets of bullying and may become bullies themselves. We teach them ways to deal with bullying.”

The school tries to incorporate aspects from public schools, including holiday dances, parties, field trips and a yearbook. This week one hallway is decorated with blue streamers for World Autism Awareness Day.

NHS Somerset also has a Stepping Stones Program for children with autism spectrum disorder who are able to be in the public school system but who need additional help after school. Sessions are grouped by ages 3 to 7 and 8 to 14. The Transition Program offers students community job placements, volunteer placements, a simulated work environment and a skill development center. Building Bridges for Girls is a specialized classroom for girls ages 12-18 that takes into account the academic and behavioral health needs of girls and young women.

NHS is located in seven states and in 17 cities in Pennsylvania. Additional information is attached to the online version of this article.