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Campus School teacher Mike Thurm works with student Jaci Jagodzinski, one of 45 children from 30 area communities enrolled at the school. (Photos by Lee Pellegrini)

Making All the Difference in Their World

For nearly 40 years, Boston area children with severe disabilities have found hope, and ‘buddies,’ at the Boston College Campus School

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Carla Tacelli DiRuzza remembers the overwhelming anxiety and fear she experienced when she had to drop off her son, Christopher, on his first day of school. It was 2003 and the Revere mom constantly worried about her nonverbal three-year-old.

Developmentally and cognitively delayed, doctors told DiRuzza that Christopher would never talk or walk. A special education program was needed, they said, because the public school system could not teach him. Despite researching Boston College’s Campus School and feeling comfortable with the placement, for many days DiRuzza stayed on campus during the school day, just in case Christopher needed her.

It's been four years since Christopher arrived at the school, which occupies the west wing of Champion Hall. Now, DiRuzza can laugh when she recalls those first few weeks.

"They have taught me how to be calmer," DiRuzza says. "I know the volunteers, the therapists, the teachers, they all love Christopher. They love what they do and it has made the difference in his life."

What kind of difference? "Two months ago, Christopher started walking on his own," DiRuzza says with pride. "It was our early Christmas present."

For the better part of four decades the Campus School has quietly been writing success stories like Christopher's. The school was founded in 1970 as a learning lab that would provide special education services to children with the most severe disabilities who cannot be served in their home communities.

The school is also a training site for Lynch School of Education students interested in jobs with the disabled. Master's students and faculty members often conduct

research on how to measure the academic progress and find ways to enhance educational experiences of the disabled and advancements, like the acclaimed EagleEyes project.

Today, 45 students from 30 different communities are enrolled at the school, each with an individualized education plan. Those students enjoy a two-to-one student-to-teacher ratio, which improves when undergraduate and graduate students volunteer as "buddies" in the classrooms. The Campus School Volunteers of Boston College and the PULSE Program work in tandem with certified teachers.

Christopher DiRuzza's teacher, Sara Davidson, is the early elementary classroom instructor. On a typical day, Davidson leads "circle time" where Christopher and his classmates are each asked to use their senses for a type of welcome introduction, choose songs and prompt the teachers to continue with switches and nonverbal cues. The daily event helps children build skills and work on Individualized Education Plan goals.

Christopher is encouraged to use sign language to say "more" and "my turn." Like most of the students in the class, he smiles, claps and makes sounds to participate in the lesson. Utilizing weekly Wednesday afternoon sessions, staff have visited the DiRuzzas' home in Revere to help with transitions from school to home and provide pointers on reinforcing what is being worked on during circle time.

Director Don Ricciato, who has been involved with the program for the past 34 years, says the complexity of the medical challenges the Campus School encounters may have increased over the years, but the philosophy has remained the same.

"We always look at ways to adapt the curriculum and instructional strategies so our students are active learners," said Ricciato. "We see them for the people they are – beyond their disability."



Kierstyn Rhodes and Campus School teacher assistant Kevin Crowley.

The typical profile of a Campus School student is a child between the ages of three to 21 with multiple disabilities. All lack the ability to speak and most have sensory limitations, including low vision, partial hearing loss and cognitive challenges. The majority of students have complex healthcare needs and nurses are often paired one-on-one in classrooms administering necessary care.

The challenge for the program, Ricciato said, is to continually update assistive technology so Campus School students are best served and Boston College students have access to the best technology in the field of special education.

Passing through the brightly colored school on a recent day, Ricciato walked from one classroom to another pointing out various methods and therapies used. "The program has evolved over time and become part of the culture of the campus," said Ricciato.

That seems to be apparent in Mike Thurm's class, when during one recent class a half-dozen students in wheelchairs and assistive devices sat learning about the states of matter. By making smoothies, Thurm explained the science, but also allowed students to participate by washing fruit, turning a blender on and off and, when possible, smell or taste the smoothie.

"We use food as a multi-sensory approach to the lesson," Thurm later explained. "The students can smell the fruit, or feel the textures. They see the ingredients and we also work on the sequence of how to make the smoothie."



"My students are typical children," says Campus School teacher Mike Thurm, shown with Caroline Ruggieri. "They get happy, excited, angry and frustrated. They have vibrant personalities."

"My students are typical children. They get happy, excited, angry and frustrated. They have vibrant personalities," said Thurm, who holds weekly conferences with families and writes daily notes to parents to keep them updated. Engaging curriculum and devoted personnel is what sets the school apart.

DiRuzza said she was in awe when school staff took a group of children apple picking. Medical attention was available for children who needed it on location, as other students enjoyed a social experience with friends.

“I really believe the Campus School makes your kid part of society,” said DiRuzza. “When you have a disabled child there is no greater gift than that.”