

GUIDING THE WAY

Counseling Professionals Focus on Supporting the Needs of Students and their Families

by Debbie Murray

The African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” proves true at Benchmark School where the focus is on the individual needs of each student. The school concentrates on fostering academic, physical, and artistic growth, as well as social and emotional development. In addition to the support of caring and knowledgeable teachers, Benchmark students receive professional guidance from the Child and Family Support Services’ team of experts every step of the way.

“An important piece of what we do is help students understand how they learn differently and address the social and emotional issues that often accompany difficulties in school,” explains Dr. Adam Lemisch, psychologist and Head of Child and Family Support Services.

In addition to Adam Lemisch, the Child and Family Support Services’ team of professionals includes: Tom Hurster, clinical social worker, Judy Sennett, certified school counselor, Ushi Tandon, licensed professional counselor, Dr. Leslie Stein, clinical psychologist, and Jessica Ratner, social work intern.

The Child and Family Support Services’ staff members are embedded within the students’ everyday learning team, consulting and collaborating regularly with teachers and parents. They are found observing in the classroom, bringing the children down for separate weekly boys’ and girls’ lunches, leading after-school activities, and meeting with children individually as needed.

Each fall, Tom Hurster and Judy Sennett also hold a regular series of meetings for parents of students new to the school. Over a two month period, they introduce various facets of the Benchmark program and invite supervisors to attend as guest speakers. This year, with help from Intern Jessica Ratner, they added another workshop for parents entitled, “Creating Family Harmony: Parenting Different Temperaments and Learning Styles.” The five-week session focuses on understanding how temperament impacts a child’s behavior, family dynamics, and his or her learning style. Leslie Stein also ran two workshops which focused on helping parents better understand the major processes involved in their child’s learning in school, and how these learning



The Child and Family Support Services team includes: (front row) Tom Hurster, Leslie Stein, Intern Jessica Ratner, Adam Lemisch, and (back row) Judy Sennett, and Ushi Tandon.

processes impact instructional strategies and drive recommendations both at school and at home.

Tom Hurster notes, “We also observe on the playground and in gym class to get a sense of social interactions. We consult with lower school teachers weekly and we support teachers any way we can. We help them understand their students and help with the emotional and social aspects of each child. There are so many ways we collaborate together and with teachers.”

Judy Sennett adds, “Everyone has a perspective and a different kind of insight. It’s important that we communicate as a team. When we are aware of the whole picture, we get a more thorough understanding of what the child really needs, and that drives the team. Also, that collective knowledge follows the child and gets built on as the child progresses from year to year.”

“We are good at understanding that every child’s profile is fluid, meaning it is changing all of the time. It is dynamic,” Ushi Tandon explains. “If you go to a public school you have an IEP meeting once a year. We talk every morning and discuss our plan. We have frequent consultations with teachers, plans are tweaked, and there are assessments and reassessments. That is what makes Benchmark a truly individualized education.”

“Children struggle at different times and for different reasons,” Adam Lemisch notes. “Our students are comfortable seeking us out. They know that we aren’t going to judge them and they feel safe. They also know that if they have an issue, it’s better to talk it through and resolve it.”

Confronting obstacles head-on is a life-skill and a confidence-builder that is taught early on at Benchmark in the classroom and with the Child & Family Support Services team. Children learn that if they run into an obstacle, they work it through and move on. It gets modeled in all areas of their development; academically, emotionally, and socially. "It's a life skill," Ushi Tandon explains. "How do you problem-solve when you run into a struggle or something you don't know how to do? Are you going to sit and feel sorry for yourself, or are you going to do something about it? By the time our students get to middle school, you see that confidence come out. To be confident you have to have self-efficacy. You have to believe that you have control over what happens to you, even if you run into difficulty. What you do matters and affects the outcome."

The Child and Family Support Services team works thoughtfully and carefully with students new to the middle school. Adam Lemisch notes, "In many cases, students who arrive at Benchmark in middle school have never built a relationship with a teacher. They quickly find out that here they can build trust and relationships and know that they have a solid support system. Students often feel that what they have been told is inaccurate. For example, perhaps a student is told that he is intelligent, but he only sees that he works slower than others or his writing isn't as good as his classmates. Everything that he sees does not make him believe that he is intelligent and that hinders a feeling of confidence. A big part of what we do is help kids feel more confident. We problem-solve and talk it out. Our students need to understand what success means and to also understand that just because they learn differently, it doesn't make them less intelligent than others."

The team supports parents as much as they do students and teachers. Parents want to be involved to support their child, but also recognize the need to gradually back away. They want to know how much their child is capable of managing on his or her own. "There are many stages along the way where we are coaching and educating parents," Judy Sennett says. "It is a partnership. They keep in touch with us so they know how much support to give at home. Sometimes it's as simple as 'No, you can't watch TV until you finish your homework' and sometimes it's a little more. They can't do it alone at home and we can't do it without them at Benchmark."

Leslie Stein helps parents better understand their child's profile. "Parents will go to psychologists and get pages and pages of information. I break it down for them and help them understand who their child is cognitively, emotionally, and socially." She also works with third-year middle school students on their portfolio projects when they interview the teachers and counselors who have had meaningful contact with them during their Benchmark careers. "As part of that process, I give these students a schema for understanding their whole learning profile, including their strengths and their challenges. It's very impressive to work with third-year students and listen to them talk about themselves and each other. They are very open and not defensive at all. I might hear, 'You're right, I can't organize myself very well right now.' They joke among themselves while attempting to deal with their inadequacies and pull it together for their next set-

ting so they can carry on without Benchmark support."

"We know that receiving schools recognize who the Benchmark students are," Leslie adds. "Benchmark students know how to study and ask for help. They don't get paralyzed by an obstacle because they have a plan of action and know how to execute that plan to get something done. It's rewarding for us to hear college students say that the most beneficial thing in their life was their experience at Benchmark."

Tom Hurster says, "Our goal is for each student to be a successful, self-aware, life-long learner. My colleagues bring an incredible wealth of experience to the table. It's very unusual for a school to have a team with this much expertise working with children."

"We bring our different ways of looking at things together," Adam Lemisch adds. "I trust our team totally. What they do and how they look at things through their training, their experience and who they are, have contributed to how we've all grown together and the success we have had working with students, teachers, and parents."