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Special School Meets Special Needs

De LaSalle Propels Exceptional Students to Success

by Yvette Schultz

DE LASALLE ACADEMY of Fort Myers opened in 2012 to meet a growing need for specialized education for students with learning disabilities. The school, located on Plantation Road, grew from 69 students in its first year to 140 its first three years. That kind of growth happens for a reason.

Unassuming on the outside, inside the walls of De LaSalle a palpable feel of joy and goodness can be felt. That is largely attributed to the leadership and passion of director and Principal Lori Riti and her highly trained education professionals.

The school educates students in grades 1-12 who have a variety of needs. Some kids have high IQs but struggle to learn, while others struggle in the social arena. Other children have lower cognitive functioning and need a unique and specialized program to help them learn. Focusing on the individual students, getting to know them intimately, and ascribing a specific education plan for each one is De LaSalle's mission. By the smiles on the teachers' and students' faces, the school appears to be succeeding.

Riti, who worked at another local school for children with learning disabilities prior to opening De LaSalle, is passionate about the school's mission and students. Offering a "beacon of hope for students with learning disabilities," Riti does not sidestep the statistics about children who fall through the cracks.

"In our country, roughly 75 percent of the individuals who are incarcerated are individuals with learning challenges. That tells you something," said Riti. "Our educational system is struggling to meet the needs of students who learn differently, and it's not for lack of trying. I will never

speak badly of public schools, but I feel it is so challenging to meet the needs of kids who learn differently. It is clear they are really struggling."

Riti states those facts to highlight the success of De LaSalle. "We have the ability to create a program that fits the needs of the kids instead of the kids fitting into a program. I think that's the biggest difference." Students are referred to the school by parents, family friends, teachers in both the public and private sector, speech therapists, doctors and counselors.

Without specialized education, statistically a significant portion of kids with learning disabilities ends up being unemployable. However, Riti estimates that 95% of her students will live productive and independent lives, with many heading off to college.

"Our motto here is, 'No couch potatoes.' When you leave here you need to do something that promotes your own independence," she stated.

In addition to failing in the traditional systems, many students with learning disabilities are bullied and have built up unhealthy coping mechanisms to survive.

"Kids come in like an onion... you have to peel away the layers to get to the heart of them," explained Riti. "Once they get here, we see their shoulders drop, they open up. They realize they are in a safe place. Nobody is going to make fun of them because they learn differently. They realize that



the real issue is not so much how they learn, but how they were being taught."

GerriAnne Duke's 17-year-old son, Robert, has been a student at De LaSalle since it opened.

"I'm no longer worried if Robert is in a safe environment, being ignored by his teacher or bullied by other students," says Duke of her son's experience at the school. "The safe and nurturing environment of De LaSalle Academy has been pivotal in helping Robert develop a passion for learning, a strong desire to work hard and confidence to simply be himself."

The student body at De LaSalle is broken up into 12 homerooms. There are 20 full-time teachers and 4 full-time therapists to address the students' occupational, speech and therapeutic needs. This gives families access to several trained professionals in one setting; not only alleviating the stress of having to find those resources on their own but also helping parents and teachers integrate and address the student's specific needs inside the classroom.

Todd and Amy Genzlinger's 16-year-old daughter, Maddy, has been enrolled at De LaSalle for four years. In her public school, Maddy was failing

“I feel safe and no longer have to worry about being bullied...and now I have more friends”

Robert Duke

several subjects and being told she was learning as much as she was capable. However, with the specialized approach at De LaSalle, Maddy is thriving.

“She is not only on grade level for every class, she is reading at a 12th-grade level in 10th grade,” explained Amy Genzlinger. “De LaSalle recognized that Maddy was smart, but needed extra help and alternative learning strategies.”

Maddy’s dad, Todd, added, “It has given us hope for Maddy to have a bright, independent future. We know that she is in a school with teachers who know her and love her. They work closely with us on at-home strategies to help her academically as well as socially. We feel thrilled that she is in a place that challenges her and is helping with the life skills she will need as an adult.”

Maddy is on schedule to graduate with a standard diploma, and is even talking about college.

Many people are surprised to discover that students with learning disabilities can succeed in college, and don’t know that students with documented disabilities will continue to receive the support they need in college. De LaSalle prepares students by helping them be emotionally ready for the high stakes environment of college, and to equip them with the organizational and study skills necessary to succeed.

“If we can get those kind of nebulous skills nice and tight before they leave here, their learning disability will not keep them from achieving,” affirmed Riti.

Though De LaSalle is a private, non-for-profit school, over one-third of the families enrolled are at or below the poverty level and their kids receive free or reduced lunch. About 85% of

those enrolled qualify for McKay or Gardiner Scholarships from the state of Florida. Often, the school provides families with financial support for the remaining balance; annually, the school grants over \$250,000 in scholarships.

Currently there are waiting lists for the elementary and middle school grades, with a few openings available for high school students.

Now that the school is established and running at almost full capacity, Riti’s next focus is making De LaSalle a resource for the community. She envisions a “lab setting” where public and private sector schools are educated in ways that help the whole community lift up these special kids so they can be independent adults.

“We want to sponsor a big educational conference once a year and next year will be the first. We will have an opportunity to educate teachers as well as students and adults with disabilities,” she noted. “Eventually, we want to provide therapeutic services, workshops to help public school teachers meet needs in their own classrooms, and other staff development programs.”

Autism numbers are up and getting higher every day; currently one in 70 children are born with some level of autism. That’s a big impact on our community. “We need to be ready for that,” Riti said.

De LaSalle is an important asset to the Fort Myers community; words can only convey so much. If you’d like to visit the school to get a true feel for what they are doing for these exceptional students and families, call Riti for a tour. There are many ways to partner with the school to help it advance its reach in the community. Visit the school online at www.delasallefm.org or call 239-245-8212.

