

CHADD's TEACHER TO TEACHER AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

A Holistic Approach to Educating Faculty and Staff about ADHD by Mari Foret

The two weeks before school opens in the fall can be some of the busiest of the year. Typically, faculty and staff are setting up their rooms and finalizing lesson plans to prepare for the influx of new and returning students—as well as honing their craft through professional development opportunities.



Commonwealth Academy's faculty and staff will remember the early weeks of the 2011–12 academic year for the full-day presentation of CHADD's program, Teacher to Teacher: Classroom Interventions for the Student with ADHD. Head of School Susan Johnson, PhD, asked every teacher and staff member to attend this workshop to ensure that the school can best meet the needs of students with ADHD and their families—not just in the classroom, but at every juncture of the student-school-family relationship.

Commonwealth, a private college preparatory day school, is the first school to provide this workshop to each person within its

organization. The benefits of this holistic approach were enormous. Commonwealth also extended invitations free of charge to faculty and staff from several neighboring schools and to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Alexandria. "As local leaders in the education of students with ADHD, we believe it is our continued responsibility to disseminate information about ADHD best practices whenever possible and serve as a resource," said Dr. Johnson.

Sharon Weiss, MEd, and Maureen Gill, LCSW, described the latest research, strategies, and practical classroom techniques and interventions for students with ADHD in a dynamic, interactive presentation. A behavioral consultant, Weiss is the coauthor of *From Chaos to Calm* (Perigee, 2001) and *Angry Children, Worried Parents* (Specialty Press, 2004) and a former CHADD board member. Gill, a pediatric social worker, chairs the Fairfax County ADHD Partnership and is the parent of two young adults affected by ADHD. In addition, each participant received a copy of the *CHADD Educator's Manual on ADHD*.

After the workshop, participants were asked to complete an evaluation. The compiled results demonstrated that it had been an invaluable day for teachers and staff alike. In an audience comprised of first-year teach-

ers, new and experienced administrators, and teachers who had been teaching students with ADHD for a decade or more:

- One hundred percent of respondents said they would make changes in their teaching as a result of the training workshop. Specific examples of changes included: give choices for study habits, use more visuals, implement more peer-to-peer instruction, use the learning pyramid to plan lessons, institute systems for encouraging positive behaviors, introduce journals for impulsive students who can't wait to tell me what they know, and incorporate more one-on-one conversations with students.
- Ninety-five percent or more "felt excellent or good about" knowing at least five classroom interventions that will help increase the academic success of students with ADHD and at least five intervention strategies to address typical behavioral problems with ADHD.

Both new and experienced teachers benefited from the workshop, in very different ways. The workshop helped train new teachers in understanding students with ADHD and in implementing classroom strategies. At the



same time, it reviewed important concepts for experienced teachers, while exposing them to current research and reinforcing best practices.

"New teacher on the block, that's definitely me," commented Will Robertson, a chemistry and math teacher at Commonwealth's high school. "This is my first real teaching experience after getting my master's in chemistry.... The workshop taught me the necessity of implementing a variety of teaching strategies to help the students focus. I wasn't sure how I was going to go about teaching kids with ADHD, but this professional development workshop gave me a pathway, strategies that work. From hands-on activities to visual aids, or a small thing like a fidget toy, I learned so much in just one day."

Meanwhile, veteran teacher and chair of the history department Rob Henneberg reflected, "I have been working with children who have ADHD for eight academic years.... [The workshop] helped me revisit concepts at a critical time when teachers are reviewing our students' accommodations and setting up our classrooms for the school year. It strengthened my commitment to put these accommodations at the forefront of my teaching strategies, and it reminded me of what I am doing right. That is reassuring, and it helps me to continue to value the uniqueness of every kid who walks through my door."

We often think about learning strategies as they relate to academic subjects, but Jeff Brown found the workshop very helpful in his approach to teaching physical education: "For me, it is all about changing my coaching style... teaching in smaller segments. I now

know to talk about one element of the game, one move, one play, demonstrate it and have the kids put this into action. Then, call the students back and reinforce the same point if they need more practice, or move on if they are ready. Breaking things down into more manageable pieces will help produce the results I know they are capable of achieving."

The inclusion of support staff and administrators had direct benefit for the school as a whole, as well as providing useful strategies to improve relationships with students and families. In attendance were the school's registrar/office manager, business manager, college counselor, nurse, and director of marketing, director of communications, and director of admission. This setting boosted morale and teamwork and motivated all employees as they identified with each other's responsibilities and challenges, whether in the classroom or at the reception desk.

Because all of Commonwealth's programming is geared for students with organizational, attention, or learning differences, the workshop also brought the school's mission to life. Lisa Harrington, Registrar and Office Manager explained: "I am new to Commonwealth. I have worked many years in corporate life, but never in a school. The workshop helped me understand Commonwealth's mission and how different the culture is from my own educational experience. It set a tone for personal

acceptance of our students as I gained insight into the challenges these kids face in their daily activities. I know it will increase my patience with my own nephews who have ADHD, and in many ways, I think I will be more of an advocate in the larger community."

Harrington's comment



about the larger community resonates loudly because Commonwealth's mission extends beyond the walls of the school. "Each of our employees is an advocate for students with learning differences; and all, as a team, are responsible for disseminating and educating the larger community," commented Dr. Johnson.

By making the workshop a part of required professional development, Dr. Johnson felt strongly that relationships between the school and students and their families would be greatly enhanced, whether students were being greeted by reception, attended to by the school nurse, or working with a teacher on a specific project. Parent questions or concerns would be better understood, whether parents are discussing contracts or bills with the business office, working with admissions or advancement, or participating in a parent-teacher conference. The attainment of this goal was echoed by Melissa Pollack, a middle-school science teacher: "One of the presenters talked about the challenges of raising her own child with ADHD. This was the first time I heard a parent speak with candor about such difficulties. I gained more empathy for our families and this will influence my parent-teacher conferences."

While many school districts use CHADD's Teacher to Teacher program for faculty, Commonwealth's approach is different in that we strongly believe that each person within the organization must understand our students, their families, and their specific needs. We are proud to be leaders in taking this holistic, all-employee approach and hope that our success encourages other schools to do the same. With the right strategies and systems in place, teaching students with ADHD, and watching them attain previously unattainable goals, is pure joy. **A**

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THINKSTOCK, SHUTTERSTOCK, BONOTOM STUDIO

