

## ACDS Prepares Students For Kindergarten And Life Beyond

By Karen Gellender

School for children with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders and other disabilities celebrates new technology and facilities

We often think of kindergarten as a time for children to do little more than fill in coloring books with some friends and build castles with blocks, but the fact is, it can be tough to be a kindergartner these days. Many children experience some culture shock when they go from the relatively carefree world of pre-school (or time at home with Mom and Dad) to kindergarten, and that can lead to bouts of crying and other behavioral problems. Most children adapt, but if kindergarten can be so difficult for the average child, what problems does it present for children with disabilities?

school's students) in the last few decades ACDS has gradually opened up to serving children with all kinds of disabilities: autism, developmental disabilities, other genetic disabilities and blindness.

Capacity for speech varies greatly among children with Down syndrome, with some who love to talk and others who remain non-verbal at 5 years old. Seventy-five percent have hearing issues, approximately half have vision issues, and other common issues involve muscle tone, ambulation and sensory integration. About 18-20 percent of children born with Down syndrome are also autistic. "So we see almost any kind of issue you can imagine," said Smith.

After slowly integrating more children with other disabilities into the school population over the course of approximately 15 years, in 2004 ACDS began to fill their half-empty facility with children who did not have Down syndrome. While there was some concern among the parents of children with Down syndrome that the school was losing its focus (a concern Smith says the school has worked very hard to ameliorate), now the school is not only full, but serving as a resource to children with all kinds of disabilities from all over Long Island.

the preparation for elementary school really starts, with all children learning a standard pre-kindergarten curriculum, developed by Principal Cecilia Barry M.S., P.D., SBL/SDL.

Tackling this curriculum can be a challenge for some students, but in some cases, children from ACDS come into kindergarten more acclimated to classroom life than their peers. One ACDS mother proudly tells of her son's first day of kindergarten, when he was the only child in class who immediately knew what to do with his coat and lunchbox as soon as he walked into the classroom. For children who may struggle with some aspects of school life, feeling comfortable in their environment can count for a lot, and that feeling of comfort is one of the main things ACDS seeks to provide.

### Using New Technologies

One of the most recent changes at ACDS involves using iPads to help children with speech issues communicate. Thanks to the PTA, one family who wished to remain anonymous, and the Nassau Suffolk Chapter of the Autism Society of America, ACDS now has 11 iPads, which are primarily used by the speech pathologists. "With the iPad, children are motivated to focus and pay attention for a longer period of time. Many children with Down syndrome and autism spectrum disorders are visual learners, so the iPad appeals to their learning style," noted Barry. "It's a great opportunity."

Just recently on April 20, ACDS held a grand opening for a renovated playground and a small paved track, **made possible by a \$40,000 donation from the Cardoza family.**

"There is a special spot in my heart for ACDS, for what they did for my son and my family," said Raymond Cardoza, who met with Santo to determine what was most needed at ACDS. The renovated playground is specifically designed for children under 5 years old, which the original playground was not.

With consistent fundraising efforts and the aid of generous families like the Cardozas, ACDS hopes they can continue to serve those with disabilities on Long Island. It can be hard work, but according to Santo, it's more than worth it. "If you're having a bad day, all you need to do is walk out in the hallway and see the kids and understand that we make a difference in lives," he said.

"That is not a cliché: we make a difference in lives."



*The children in this integrated class were having a good time learning all about the natural world together.*

"The expectations for kindergarten have grown exponentially in the past ten years," said Michael Smith, executive director of ACDS (Association for Children with Down Syndrome/ Lifetime Service for Individuals with Special Needs.) "What a child used to be expected to know for first grade they are now expected to know for kindergarten, so we have really had to ramp up our training and preparation so our kids can succeed when they get to kindergarten."

The primary goal of ACDS is to prepare children with disabilities to attend kindergarten and beyond in their home districts, preferably in integrated classrooms. The school, located on Fern Place in Plainview, was founded in 1966 by the parents of children with Down syndrome in the community. While the organization's heritage will always be serving those with Down syndrome (a group that still makes up 45-50 percent of the

### Hitting The Ground Running

The school's two major programs are Early Intervention and Preschool. Early Intervention starts from a diagnosis, with therapists and educators coming to serve the children at their homes from babyhood. At 18-20 months, the children come to the school, where they play with other children while still receiving professional service. Contrary to what used to be a common belief, Smith explains, autistic children can be social as well and get a lot out of interacting with their peers.

Sometimes, Early Intervention starts not from the time of diagnosis, but even prior to birth; mothers pregnant with children with Down syndrome often work with ACDS before their baby is born, whether or not their child goes on to attend the school.

At the age of 3, the children transition to the Preschool program, which is funded by the state education department (EI is funded by the department of health.) At this point,