

## **Autism Program Environment Rating Scale (APERS) Report**

**School:** Thomas Jefferson Elementary (Jab)

**Date:** 4/14/2011

**Grade Level:** Elementary

**Program Type:** Self-Contained, grades 3-5

### **What is the APERS and how does it work?**

Data to complete the APERS-PE were obtained through observations of a self-contained elementary classroom, and interviews of the students' teacher, a team member (the speech language pathologist), and a parent.

The APERS-PE is divided into eleven domains. Individual items were rated based on observations in the classroom and/or interviews (i.e., teacher, team member, and parent). Ratings for each domain are composed of the average of that domain's items. Teacher, team member, and parent interviews were completed to supplement the observational items as well as to provide information on domain items that are not observable. The ratings are meant to reflect aspects of the quality of the program and are not based on a specific learner or teacher.

The APERS-PE (version 3-27-09, revised) is being pilot tested, and the scores are not standardized. This means that the scores cannot be used to compare a program to a typical program. Scores are most useful when identifying relative strengths and weaknesses, or which areas tended to have higher scores and which areas tended to have lower scores. Given these limitations, data that were collected are considered representative of the program and classroom environment at this time. Strengths and areas for growth identified from the APERS-PE are listed below, and graphic summaries of the inclusive APERS and the APERS self-assessment are included at the end of this report.

This scoring report is a post measure administered on 4/14/2011. This is a follow up measure to the previously 9/24/2010 APERS scored as part of the NPDC in Autism grant implementation at Belmont Station Elementary School for the 2010-2011 school year. Both pre and post APERS revealed a strong program with specific strengths in several of the scored domains. The post measure revealed significant strengths in each of the 11 program components scored, with 7 of the domains obtaining the highest score possible (environment, climate, assessment, curriculum and instruction, functional behavior, family and teaming). This report confirms both progress and achievement gains from pre to post APERS measures for the classroom measured.

### **Strengths:**

As was the case with the initial APERS scored at the beginning of the school year, multiple strengths and positive program features were noted. Categorically, the post APERS revealed the following:

- Environment
  - The multiple learning environments observed are safe, well organized, and designed for learner's independence. Within the primary classroom, student personal spaces are clearly identified, and the physical structure and boundaries established are consistent with the learning

characteristics of students with ASD. Materials are well organized, age appropriate, and varied, and reflected individual learner interests. Visual supports are used throughout classroom to support behavior and instruction.

- Classroom Structure/Schedule
  - In addition to the classroom schedule written on the board each day, individual visual schedules are posted and utilized by the students throughout the instructional day. All staff are consistent in how learners are prepared for transitions and instruction begins immediately when learners move from one activity to the next.
- Positive Classroom Climate
  - All staff within the program consistently engage the learners in warm, positive and respectful interactions. Diversity and individual differences, particularly in the area of communication, are readily supported and student's effort and positive behaviors are acknowledged by both informal and formal means.
- Assessment
  - Interview and observation show that IEP goals are stated in an observable, functional, and measurable manner and that data are collected in multiple formats for all IEP goals and objectives. Assessments include information on skills needed for successful transition to the next grade, and families are involved in assessment and transition planning.
- Curriculum and Instruction
  - Well-planned instruction on IEP goals and state directed curriculum is delivered throughout the day and capitalizes on learners' strengths and interests. Embedded choice making is a feature in all instruction, and all team members use varied strategies and methods based on individual learner needs. Visual supports and sensory-based regulation strategies are routinely used across settings and activities, and a clear prompting hierarchy is implemented across instructional activities. A classroom reinforcement system is in place and team members provide preferred reinforcement choice making throughout the day.
- Communication
  - Consistent strategies to promote communication development for each student are used and all team members consistently respond to learner communication attempts. Individual communication supports are available throughout the day and across settings. Environmental arrangement strategies are used so that learners need to communicate frequently and immediate and reinforcement is provided for communication attempts.
- Staff/Peer Relationships
  - Daily opportunities for learners with ASD to interact with typically developing peers occur and team members provide support and suggestions for learners with ASD to be successful. Staff consistently

model good social skills and offer some social skills instruction within the natural environments, such as at lunch, in specials or on the playground.

- Independence
  - Multiple opportunities and numerous accommodations are in place across the day to promote learners' personal independence. Appropriate use of wait time, least to most prompting strategies, and use of visual supports enhance student independence within the program.
- Functional Behavior
  - Proactive strategies are used across activities and setting to prevent interfering behaviors. Collaboration between family and school is strong so that proactive strategies can be used in school, home and community. A comprehensive intervention plan is developed by the team, including family, and includes assessment information, instructional strategies for teaching replacement behavior, and a plan for what to do if interfering behavior continues. Data collection on the occurrence of the interfering behavior is consistent and ongoing.
- Family
  - Based upon the family interview, teacher and staff maintain positive relationships with families of students, respect confidentiality and maintain a system for regular communication. Family trust and comfort in sending children to this program is very high.
- Teaming
  - Teacher has an ongoing, collaborative relationship with all team members, and provides frequent communication and effective feedback. Team members are respected and feel that their input and expertise is valued and team meetings are held on a regularly scheduled basis. All team members have had training in ASD and all team members participate in making important decisions regarding the learners.

#### **Opportunities for Growth:**

While there were no components measured with significant challenge or need, opportunities for growth are noted below. As seen in the self-assessment graph, the areas identified by the scoring team were mutually identified by Ms. Jab. These include:

- Classroom Structure/Schedule
  - While classroom structure and schedule scores are very high, it was observed that the majority of instructional activities are instructor led and directed. An increase in student directed versus teacher directed activities throughout is one suggestion that could be considered. In addition, development of individualized behavior programs and reinforcement systems could replace or increase the effectiveness of the classroom ticket system that is currently in place.
- Communication

- Classroom communication supports are strong and are used consistently and with ease within this classroom. Further development of individualized communication systems and supports could expand communication opportunities for each student, (i.e. word lists, picture supports for MJ). In addition, social communication supports could assist students in social interactions with adults as well as typically developing peers. (Suggestions included during follow up conference included social scripts, sharing bags, boxes, or picture books to be used as conversation starters, visual supports for conversation exchanges etc.). A continued emphasis on functional communication training to provide a communication rather than behavioral response, (such as “break,” “help,” “no,” or “wait) could decrease the display of challenging behavior and increase positive communication. Resources for functional communication training and social narratives can be available at the NPDC website (<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/social-narratives> and <http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/functional-communication-training> ).
- Peer Relationships
  - The teacher in this self-contained program has already initiated a number of learning opportunities with typically developing peers. However, implementation of daily and systematic social skills instruction (specific social skills training in conjunction with targeted IEP social skills goals, peer mediated instruction, etc.) as well as increased social skills instruction and support during lunch, recess and when bringing peers into the classroom could enhance the social skills development of all students. Resources for peer-mediated intervention and social skills groups are available on the NPDC website (<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/peer-mediated-instruction-and-intervention> and <http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/social-skills-groups>). The online module for peer-mediated intervention is available at [www.autisminternetmodules.org](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org).
- Independence
  - Due to the effective implementation of the evidenced based practice least-to-most prompting, as well as the appropriate use of visual supports, students within this classroom demonstrate a high degree of independence. In addition, students could be taught self-management skills (monitoring their own behavior) to further promote their independence. For more information about self-management, see the self-management brief (<http://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/self-management>) or the self-management online module ([www.autisminternetmodules.org](http://www.autisminternetmodules.org)).

In summary, the pre-post APERS measures suggest this classroom has strengths in all domains measured, and is an exemplary program in many evidenced based practices in ASD as identified by the NPDC on ASD. The pre APERS revealed strengths in the program's positive learning climate, high responsiveness to students' communication and learning attempts, and trust and respect shown by family members. Through participation in the NPDC grant, and the resulting competence in implementing evidenced based practices in ASD with fidelity, the post APERS reveals further program strengths, with high scores across all domains . In comparing pre and post measures, perhaps the most noteworthy growth has been the evidenced increase in student independence, as measured in the decrease in staff prompting, increase of wait time for independent student responding, consistent use of visual supports across all learning environments, and introduction of structured work systems for independent student work. Agreement between APERS scored by the observation team and the APERS self-assessment completed by the teacher suggest that systematic social skills instruction, introduction of self-management technique and individualized communication and social supports would be target areas to even further develop this exemplary elementary program for students with ASD.

