

ADMINISTRATOR'S GUIDE

to Educational Programming for Students with

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



Dear School Administrator,

The Florida Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) are pleased to provide you with this copy of *A School Administrator's Guide to Educational Programming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*. This guide provides materials associated with a training module and validated classroom assessment tool that will assist you in addressing the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum who attend your school in both general education and special education classrooms. CARD is a legislatively-funded Florida Department of Education discretionary project with expertise in autism spectrum disorder, and is available to provide support to teachers and administrators through consultation, technical assistance and training. All services provided by CARD are at no cost to our constituents or schools.

Ways CARD provides help:

- Meeting with autism program coordinators from your school districts to plan, develop workgroups, and provide a forum to share issues, needs and opportunities.
- Collaborating on the development of a yearly training and technical assistance plan with school districts, designed to deliver instruction for teachers and educators pertaining to best educational practices for students with autism spectrum disorder.
- Offering a training day for teachers at the annual statewide CARD conference.
- Sponsoring regional annual summer institutes in partnership with school districts.
- Developing a statewide landing page (<http://www.florida-card.org>) affiliated with FDOE, where educators can access links to their local CARD for ASD resources, training modules, and other materials.

This guide provides school administrators with information on the educational needs of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), foundations for students with ASD, regardless of the classroom setting and tools for guiding a classroom observer to evaluate the degree and quality of implementation of ASD classroom best practices. One classroom fidelity rating form whose utility has been research validated is provided. The quality indicators referenced in this tool represent those that one should generally expect to see implemented in high quality classrooms serving students with ASD. This tool can be used in a variety of ways by administrators or teachers themselves. In all cases, the goal should be to enhance classroom quality. The *classroom fidelity rating form* provided online offers a solid starting point for program evaluation and professional development planning.

We also have a tool designed to assist administrators to self-assess if their current practices are *supportive of the needs of the ASD classroom*, and a checklist for supporting students with ASD in general education settings. We hope you will find these materials helpful. CARD is always available to provide follow up assistance upon your request. Thank you for your ongoing efforts to provide quality education for students with autism spectrum disorder.

ADDRESSING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has a profound impact on all areas of a child's development, specifically affecting social, communication, sensory and behavioral functioning across the life span. Understanding the nature of the condition is important for educators, as is the impact these challenges have on the student's performance in school.

Provided below is a summary of the ways the characteristics of ASD may influence how these students perform in school.

Curriculum and Learning Challenges

- **Difficulty using contextual information to interpret symbols and abstract concepts.** As a result, students may have challenges with problem solving, discrimination of relevant from irrelevant information, generalization of previously learned strategies, and synthesis of meaning from contextual cues.
- **Inconsistent ability to demonstrate learned skills,** particularly in settings outside the original instructional context or as a result of relatively minor changes to the environment.

- **Poor organizational abilities.** These challenges can affect a student's ability to independently complete and submit assignments or homework. Successfully learning time concepts and mastering time management skills is a core challenge for students with ASD.

Social and Communication Characteristics

- **Challenges with use and understanding of verbal and non-verbal communication.** Some students will be nonverbal, and require constant access to an alternative communication system. Others will speak, but have difficulty knowing how to use and interpret nonverbal strategies to support communication, such as body language, gestures and facial expressions.
- **Difficulties with using communication for social purposes** and in a manner that is appropriate for the social context. Social pragmatics, such as making eye contact, following conversation rules, timing, and adapting communication based on the needs

“As an educator it is our privilege to educate all students, which includes our students with disabilities. As a parent of a student with special needs, I know first hand the hopes and dreams that parents have for their students as well as the frustration and concerns. Therefore our classrooms must be inclusive to meet the needs of our students. As an Administrator, I work with our faculty, staff, parents and students to build a culture of inclusion in our classrooms and across our school. While the process can be time consuming, it is time well spent. When I see our students thriving and growing it fills my heart with joy. While our graduation ceremony is a wonderful event for all students, it is especially gratifying to for me when I watch my students with special needs achieve their dreams.”

*Kim D. Moore, Ed.S., Assistant Principal for Magnet Curriculum
Middleton High School — A Pre-Collegiate STEM Academy
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of the listener or context greatly influence a student's success in social learning experiences. Quite often students with autism spectrum disorder struggle in group learning activities because of limited social pragmatic abilities.

- **Trouble interpreting social situations**, or knowing how to anticipate, interpret and make judgments about a social situation, influences a student's ability to maintain social interactions during instructional activities. Social interest is often limited.
- **Difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships with peers.** Students with ASD often have difficulties in social or emotional reciprocity based on taking the perspective of another person. This can result in ill-timed and awkward social approaches or failure to initiate or respond to social interactions. Some students have poor play skills. Social standing among peers, the ability to influence the behavior and perceptions of peers, is also an important factor in successful learning. It's not uncommon for students with autism spectrum disorder to have difficulties with peers.



- **Students with ASD may have difficulty regulating sensory information that interferes with learning.** Students may seek out or recoil from sensory experiences. You may notice a student covering his ears when noise levels do not seem loud at all, or being distracted by a beam of sunlight on the floor. Some students will actively seek out smells, textures or visual stimulation or engage in unusual repetitive motor movements. While typically developing students are able to successfully process the auditory, visual and tactile information in a classroom and still focus their attention on the relevant aspects of the activity, it is common for students with ASD to demonstrate differences in arousal levels and sensory regulation, which play a significant role in their school success.

Many students with autism spectrum disorder are affected by additional issues that may impact their learning, including chronic health conditions, medication regimens, special diets, food sensitivities or irregular sleep patterns. Many students with ASD have poor motor planning for fine motor tasks, making handwriting and note taking areas of frustration.

Unusual Sensory and Attentional Preferences and other Influences on Learning

- **Narrowly defined or unusual interest in materials**, often with uneven abilities or unusual skills in a few areas and limited capacity for self-regulation are common in students with ASD. Teachers may notice a student's reliance on rituals or routines and tendency to need task closure to self-regulate. Students may use materials in unusual ways, such as spinning or lining up items, or continually speak about the same topic.
- **Difficulties with transitions and changes in routine.** Students with ASD thrive on very predictable routines and may demonstrate extreme distress at seemingly small changes. Preparing students in advance can be very helpful when a transition or change in schedule is planned.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Given the diverse range of cognitive, social and behavioral needs of students with ASD, a broad perspective is necessary to address their educational priorities. However, there is an evidence base of common elements of educational programming that should be present as a foundation for successful outcomes.

- **Teaming/Collaboration.** Because of the complex educational needs of students with autism spectrum disorder, educational and clinical team members should work together to meet student goals. Families play a vital role in their child's education; evidence of their involvement should be apparent.
- **Classroom Structure.** Students with ASD have educational and learning priorities that go beyond the scope of the academic curriculum. Many of these students receive special education services, driven by an individualized plan that articulates their educational priorities. A growing body of educational research continues to demonstrate that the educational priorities of many students with autism spectrum disorder, as well as those of their peers, can be effectively addressed in the context of typical school settings and experiences. Special educational services provide a continuum of supports that adapt to the learning context indicated by the student's individualized educational plan.
- **Challenging Behavior.** Successful behavior supports are grounded utilizing Positive Behavior Supports for collaborative teaming, functional assessment and the acquisition of adaptive skills that promote meaningful life outcomes for the student. Systematically collected data provides evidence regarding the effectiveness of behavior supports and interventions. This information should be gathered and synthesized on a regular basis and used to monitor educational progress as well as modify instruction when necessary.
- **Curriculum and Instruction.** Behaviors that are characteristic of autism spectrum disorder often reflect underlying skill deficits in cognition, communication and social abilities. An effective educational program therefore incorporates systematic identification of priority skills, embeds targeted instruction into meaningful activities and promotes skill generalization into new and difference contexts. This will promote a positive instructional climate that will serve the needs of all students.
- **Classroom Environment.** Visual learning skills are often an area of relative strength for students with autism spectrum disorder. Therefore an effective educational program will provide visual information regarding routines, expectations and procedures throughout all aspects of a student's school experience.
- **Social and Peer Relationships.** Learning with and from their peers is particularly relevant for students with social interaction challenges. Because of this, frequent and consistent learning experiences shared between students of all ability levels leads to an appreciation for diversity throughout the entire school community. Acquisition of greater social competence, which involves the ability to make appropriate social judgments and decisions, in addition to successfully performing these pro-social behaviors is a goal for all students.
- **Family Involvement.** Promoting positive relationships and open communication with families of students diagnosed with ASD yields better outcomes. Parents are an integral partner in the process of educating students and can have information that will assist teachers in opening the door to learning.

9 ISSUES FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO ADDRESS

1. Due to the prevalence and growth in numbers of students with ASD, all teachers must be prepared to teach children with ASD. Every student and staff member at your school will come in contact with a student carrying this educational classification during their school or professional careers. Teachers of students with ASD require additional support. The educational success of students with ASD is a direct reflection of well-informed and successful teachers and staff. School team members working with these students need specialized and ongoing training, relevant materials, and administrative support for their instructional activities. Self-contained ASD classrooms require adequate staffing to provide intensive educational methodologies supported by evidence based practices.
2. Students with ASD are more similar to other typically developing students than they are different. This recognition is the foundation for building strength based educational experiences that draw all students together into their school community.
3. From an educational perspective, challenging behaviors are most often a reflection of skill deficits.
4. Support is multidimensional. Support should be provided in multiple forms, including curricular accommodations or modifications, behavioral planning, environmental cues and devices, and facilitated support from peers as well as direct supervision from an adult.
5. Students and their learning environments are both mutually adaptable. While a student with ASD disorder can be supported to adapt to the rules, routines and demands of the school setting, the school environment must in turn accommodate the differences of all the learners within it. This applies to the culture of the school as a community, as well as to the classroom environment and school facilities.
6. Instructional goals are flexible and individualized. The playing field isn't always a level place. Students with ASD may often have learning goals that are different from those of other students and require individual supports within the same learning context in order to achieve success toward those goals.
7. Every moment is a teachable moment. Students with ASD learn most efficiently when skills are taught in their natural context. Because of this, every person that interacts with them is a teacher; every moment of the school day is a natural opportunity for teaching.
8. Accountability and measurement of performance applies to all students, including those who do not participate in annual standardized academic assessments. Alternative methods for measuring progress, including data collection methods and portfolio assessments will all yield information regarding the student's progress toward his or her individual goals and should be utilized on an ongoing basis.
9. Parents are the child's first teacher. As such, they are knowledgeable about instructional priorities and their child as a learner. Establishing respectful, collaborative partnerships with the families of students with ASD is the starting point for successful learning both at school and within the larger community.



Florida's First Choice for Autism Support

OUR MISSION

The mission of the Centers for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) is to provide support and assistance that optimizes the potential of people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and related disabilities. Our efforts to achieve this mission is exemplified in the four "Components for Caring" that are the focus of our work:

Direct Assistance

Providing individualized consultation and coaching to people with ASD and related disabilities and their families in natural community settings.

Technical Assistance & Consultation

Undertaking activities on behalf of the programs (e.g., classroom, supported living residence, supported employment site, etc.) that serve people with ASD and related disabilities.

Professional Training

Providing instruction on ASD and related disabilities through our workshops, conferences, in-service trainings, and community events.

Public Education and Awareness

Developing and disseminating information about people with ASD and related disabilities.

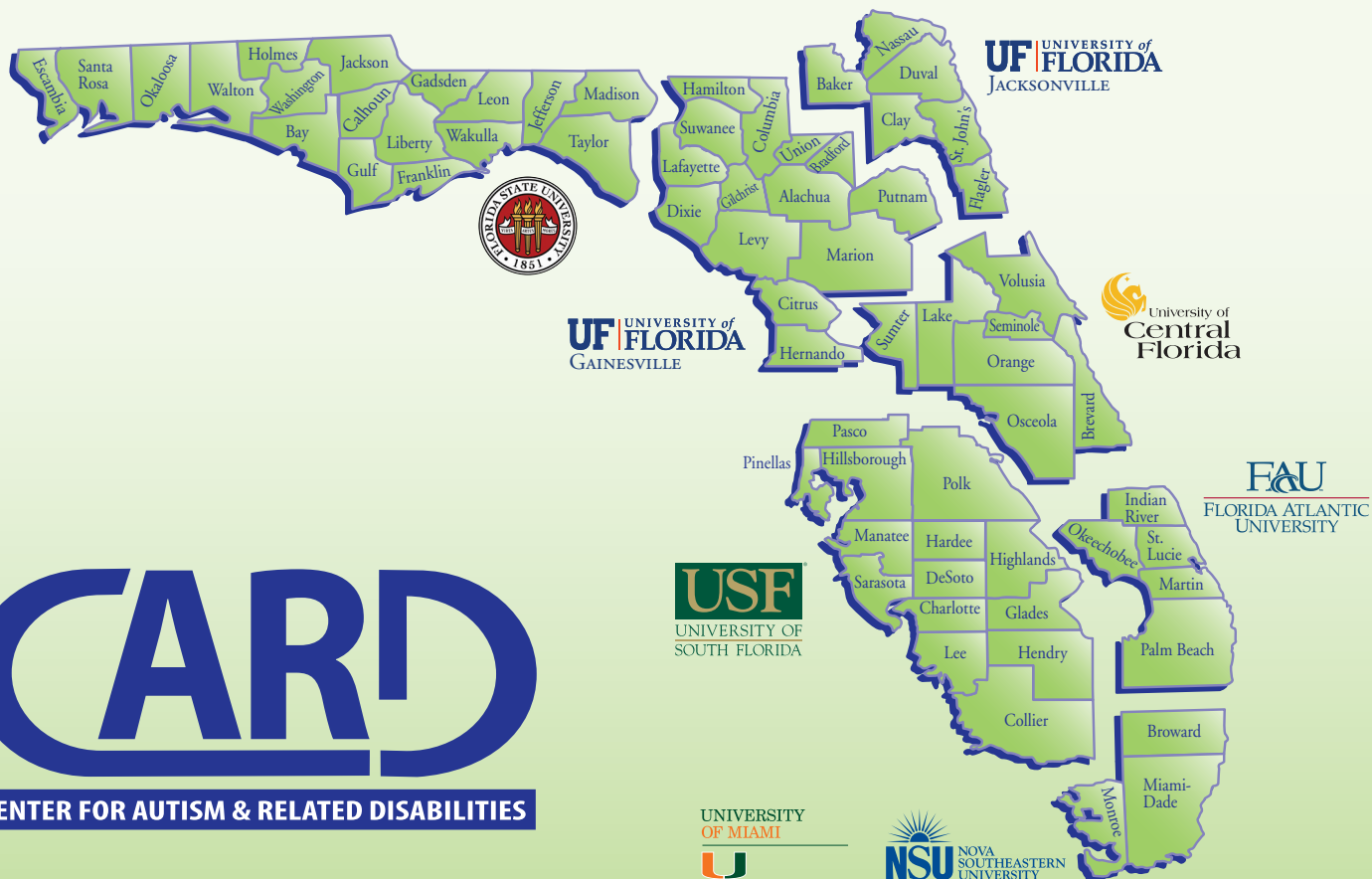
CARD provides its services free of charge to individuals with ASD and related disabilities, their families, related professionals, and the general public throughout the state of Florida.

ENDORSEMENT POLICY

As a policy, CARD will not lend its name to the endorsement of any specific program, practice, or model that is offered for service to people with ASD and related disabilities. We support evidence-based practices in our field. However, the sharing of information and training opportunities are key functions of the CARD program.

Events, activities, programs, and facilities of the of CARD are available to all without regard to race, color, marital status, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, sexual orientation, Vietnam or disabled veteran status as provided by law and in the accordance with the University's respect for personal dignity.





The Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) provides support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism spectrum disorder and related disabilities.

AUTISM
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