

When School Districts like Wauconda, IL Need Help Supporting Students with Autism, they Look to IAP Experts like Sarah Greenfield

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IAP partners with schools and school districts to provide individualized coaching, consulting, and training programs to support students with autism. Read about how IAP Autism Specialist Sarah Greenfield helps teams in the Wauconda school district.

A young learner with autism needed extra assistance.

A kindergartner with an autism spectrum disorder was struggling to adjust at the beginning of a new school year at Robert Crown Elementary School in Wauconda, Illinois. New routines, changes, and transitions can be difficult for many individuals with autism, and the student was having a hard time regulating her emotions and engaging in class. This is the exact kind of situation that the experts from the Illinois Autism Partnership (IAP) at Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford are trained to support.

IAP partners with school districts, schools, residential homes, and police and fire departments to provide programming for individuals with an autism spectrum disorder or other related disability. In schools, IAP staff provide individualized coaching, consulting, and training programs. In this case, the school's coach was Sarah Greenfield, an autism specialist with more than ten years of experience as a special educator.

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Grace Linning, the student's kindergarten teacher, says, “Sarah is the epitome of an exceptional coach. She came in and gave us a bunch of different strategies to help the student regulate herself. She also helped us with visual supports and token boards to help the student see what we are doing, what we completed, and what is coming up. We really focused on finding what this student likes, what she dislikes, and what things help her calm down.”

With Greenfield's support, the student has become a star pupil, says Ms. Linning. She is interacting with her peers, dancing, participating in class more, and able to transition to and from special classes with no problem.

Supporting classroom setups across Wauconda's Independent Life Skills program

Greenfield supports three schools—elementary, middle, and high—in the Wauconda school district through its Independent Life Skills (ILS) program that serves student with autism, but also those with other disabilities like Down syndrome. In the summer prior to the 2023-24 year, Greenfield helped teachers set up their classrooms to serve students with developmental disabilities with evidence-based best practices. For example, an elementary classroom is generally set up with clearly defined stations and visuals around the room that help students understand what happens at each station, what to expect, and how to transition.

Greenfield explains, “People with autism thrive on routine and structure. So, in an autism classroom,

you want all areas to be clearly defined so students know that when they're working in area one, they're doing group work with a teacher, while in area two, they're expected to work independently. Ideally, the student would know what the expectations are in each station, 'when I go to this table, I get my binder and I do three worksheets that the teacher put in there for me,' for example.

The classroom would also include a sensory station or a chill zone for when students are overstimulated. The space has resources to help students relax depending on their sensory needs like sensory toys, books on breathing, body socks, weighted vests, and visuals that describe how to calm down.

"Individuals with autism tend to be either sensory seeking or sensory avoidant, it really depends on the individual. Someone who's sensory seeking may love playing with sand, touching different textures, or getting pressure on their shoulders, while someone who is sensory avoidant might hate touching glue, have a hard time with pressure or being touched, or get upset by the feel of a tag on their shirt. It's a spectrum! So, we work to create a sensory area in combination with a calming space, so each individual can find what they need."

Greenfield also helps teachers create a leisure station where students can do puzzles on an iPad, for example, which helps students with autism develop a skill that many might take for granted.

"For a lot of people with autism, work is play and play is work, so finding things for them to do during leisure can be a challenge. It doesn't always make sense to them, so one focus is expanding and building on their leisure skills," says Greenfield.



Listening to what a student's behavior is saying and developing appropriate intervention plans

Greenfield also helps teachers across the schools develop behavioral intervention plans (BIPs), draft curricula, create schedules and token boards, support students when they attend general education classes, and assist with behavioral meltdowns as they happen. She's also held trainings on data collection to support students with autism and how to better respond to negative behaviors.

Jackie Quinn, a teacher at Wauconda High School, says "Sarah has been an incredible resource in helping the Independent Life Skills Program at the high school feel successful in supporting our students by giving us the tools, resources, and confidence to foster growth inside and outside of the classrooms. Sarah's never-ending creative ideas have helped to bridge gaps in our program and provide consistency and accountability for student success."

At the high school, Greenfield's expertise has proven to be instrumental in providing support to the team as they develop their student behavior plans. For example, Sarah collaborated with the team in creating a new plan for a student whose elopement (leaving a designated area without permission) behaviors and emotional meltdowns could last upwards of two hours. Because of Sarah's guidance and support, the team was able to implement a well thought out plan, which resulted in the length of this student's behaviors decreasing to approximately 20 minutes.

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"This dramatic improvement would not have been successful without Sarah's dedication and passion to support our team in understanding what this student was trying to communicate to us in his behaviors. Her endless persistence, patience, and passion has been an invaluable asset to Wauconda High School's ILS program," says Quinn.

A partner that students and staff are excited to welcome back.

For the Wauconda school district, Greenfield has become an indispensable extension of their teaching and learning team, someone the staff and students are excited to welcome into the building.

"Sarah's support extends far beyond the classroom; she is always available for questions and to celebrate all the big (and the smallest) victories," says Ms. Linning. "Sarah has been a big part of why my first year of teaching has been fantastic. My students, paraprofessionals and related services all have been grateful to have Sarah as our coach. Even the other staff in the school have noticed what a difference Sarah has made."

Ms. Quinn adds, "The students love when Sarah joins our classrooms and especially our community outings; her vibrant personality makes students and staff feel like they can achieve our goals, big or small. I was thrilled to hear that our district is bringing her back next year to continue the positive momentum she is creating in our program."